

'The Double Blow: 1956 and the Communist Party
of Great Britain'

Katharine Jane Hudson

PhD

School of Slavonic and East European Studies

University of London 1992



ProQuest Number: 10610540

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10610540

Published by ProQuest LLC (2017). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

Three years after Stalin's death, Khrushchev shocked the world by revealing much of the truth about the crimes of Stalin. Most affected by the revelations were the Communist Parties, who had held Stalin in god-like reverence. This thesis examines the effects, both of these revelations on the British Communist Party, and of the second cataclysmic event of that year - the Hungarian Uprising and its suppression by Soviet tanks.

It appears that to many members, an opportunity was presented by Khrushchev's frankness, to renew the Communist movement and set aside the old dogmatic ways; this desire for real change did not, unfortunately, permeate the ranks of the British Party leadership. At all points, whilst allowing open debate to proceed, the leadership took positions and expressed views designed to consolidate and continue in the old mould.

Demands for a rigorous analysis of the Stalinist period, including the role of the system of democratic centralism, were never fully taken up; the British Party leadership persisted in taking the Khrushchev line - that Stalin, and the cult of the personality, were responsible for the abuses. The questioning of basic Communist principles, such as democratic centralism was not permitted.

Considerable debate did take place, however, within the Party press and in the unofficial journal 'The Reasoner', on many topics including Inner-Party Democracy, the rewriting of 'The British Road to Socialism', anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and unrest in Eastern Europe. The leadership eventually responded to demands for a Special Congress in recognition of the cataclysmic nature of the

events.

The British Party leadership sought primarily to defend what it knew best - the structures of the Party, and its unthinking loyalty to the Soviet Union. This latter feature proved a heavy strain on the Party when the leadership unconditionally supported the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising. The combined effect of the events of 1956 led to a membership loss in the region of 7,000.

1956 appears to have been a tragically wasted opportunity for the international Communist movement. Having exposed and rejected the distortions of the Stalin period, the possibilities were not taken up. The man had gone, but the system remained unaltered. This thesis attempts to show, however, that whilst the British Party had been nominally independent since the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, it was, because of its historical development, psychologically subordinate to Moscow. For the leaders of the British Communist Party to have gone against the Soviet line, no matter how appalling their decisions, no matter how reasonable the arguments of the British Party dissidents, would have been inconceivable.

For many British Communists, Marxism-Leninism had become an article of faith, rather than a political philosophy and practical tool; for many others however, the events of 1956 demonstrated that faith and reason could no longer be reconciled. Despite the departure of many, this dichotomy was to remain within the British Communist Party, along with the structures of democratic centralism, until its dissolution in November 1991.

Contents:

Introduction page 5

Chapters:

1. The development of the CPGB from 1920 and the influence upon it of the Soviet Union page 9
2. Cominform Excesses page 34
3. The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the Official British Response page 60
4. Problems and Anxieties page 96
5. 'The Reasoner' - a Journal of Discussion page 115
6. 'The British Road to Socialism' page 160
7. The Commission on Inner-Party Democracy page 192
8. The Hungarian Uprising page 231
9. The Recognition of the Crisis, and the Special National Congress, 1957 page 267
10. After the Congress - Conclusions page 311

Bibliography page 353

The Double Blow - 1956 and the Communist Party of Great Britain

Introduction

Until the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, no single year in the history of the international communist movement had had such a powerful negative impact on the movement itself, and on its standing in the world, as 1956. Many critics have focussed on 1939 and the signing of the Russian-German non-aggression Pact (usually referred to by them as the 'Nazi-Soviet' pact) as the year of great betrayal and communist shame, but in the event the opportunity for anti-Soviet propaganda arising from that pact was washed away in the great surge of admiration for the Soviet Union in its fight against and ultimate defeat of the Nazi armies in the Second World War. The significance of 1956 is that it undermined the confidence and faith of the movement from within the movement itself. Khrushchev himself, as leader of the Soviet Union, and of the Soviet Communist Party, laid bare the truth about the crimes committed during the Stalin era. Many of the accusations levelled against the Soviet Union by the bourgeois press throughout the 1930s in particular, were admitted to be true - the great purges, the show trials. Perhaps most horrifically of all, it was communists, old Bolsheviks who had suffered most at the hands of the Soviet regime.

Communists found many different ways of dealing with this blow - some left the Party, around 7,000 out of 33,000 in Britain; others refused to accept the truth of the revelations, or persisted in believing that the end justified the means; others struggled hard and long to separate the reality of the Soviet experience from the potential of Marxist theory and practice itself, and the extensions of democracy and freedom that it promises. This last group was the largest - the party members who chose to stay within the CPGB, and come to terms with the Soviet experience, yet still fight against capitalism in Britain.

Nevertheless, for those who remained, the task was incredibly hard. Not only was there increasing hostility from the world at large, but a terrible lack of confidence within the party itself which continued throughout the life of the CPGB and culminated in its dissolution in November, 1991. This lack of confidence rendered the party in many cases almost incapable of action - certainly it eventually made it reluctant to give leadership. The questions thrown up about the democracy or otherwise of inner party structures, designed after all on the Soviet model which had allowed the rise and domination of Stalin, were not fully resolved. The system of democratic centralism was retained and remained within the party until its dissolution, leading some to the conclusion that although Stalinism was rejected in theory, it was retained within the structures of the Party itself.

Yet some welcomed the revelations, feeling them almost a relief, for many had come to suspect, through their contact, for example, with

the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, that the situation in eastern Europe as a whole was not as rosy as it might seem. These problems could now be dealt with and democracy re-emphasised, as it was in the new edition of 'The British Road to Socialism', the party's programme rewritten in 1957 and republished in 1958. The idea that the Soviet Union was confronting its mistakes and dealing with them was widely held, hence the shock for many of the Soviet intervention in Hungary in November 1956. Whilst the party line emerged in support of Soviet intervention to help the communist government quell a counter-revolution, many party members felt this to be a second great blow in an already traumatic year.

That the events within, and activities of, the Soviet Union should have had such a marked effect on the membership of the Communist Party in Great Britain serves only to underline the strength of the bonds between the Soviet Union and other Communist Parties. Despite the fact that since its birth in 1920 the Communist Party had played an active part in British politics, had since the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 been theoretically independent of Moscow, and had since 1951 adopted its own road to socialism, communism and the Soviet Union were still inextricably linked together, not only to the populace as a whole, but also to the Communist Party member. Whilst this had in many ways been an asset to the Party at certain points, particularly after the Soviet Union entered the Second World War, it ceased to be so after the publication of Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech'.

The real tragedy of 1956, was that it was a wasted opportunity. The communist movement had one chance, not only to expose and reject the disastrous and criminal parts of its history and practices, but to analyse the reasons for these developments, to study its failures, and to renew itself as a dynamic and progressive movement. By making public the crimes of the Stalin period, Khrushchev had taken the vital first step, but it became clear that the Soviet leadership was inclined to lay all blame at the door of Stalin and the cult of the personality. There was no desire - and this was shared by the leadership of the British party - to analyse the system of democratic centralism, which had allowed the rise and domination of Stalin, and ensured, even in Britain, that a leadership had virtually complete control over all aspects of party life, including the election of its successor. Such was the turmoil within the party in 1956, that all these questions were raised and debated, yet the end result was virtually no change.

But could the party have changed itself at this point? In many ways the party and the leadership was a prisoner of its own past - until 1943 part of the Comintern, loyalty to the Soviet Union its very lifeblood, adherence to the pronouncements of the great communist leaders unquestioning. For many members and indeed most of the leadership, to question democratic centralism - itself a Leninist principle, to doubt Marxism-Leninism, to flirt with factionalism, to flout the party rules, was unthinkable. So it was that the party had become too rigidly set in this particular mould; the doubts and creativities of those who sought radical change, yet were committed nevertheless to a Communist Party, came up against a stone-wall of

conservatism. Study of the events of 1956 and of the historical experience of the CPGB, shows that hopes of any significant change at this point either in terms of independence of political position, or internal political structures were impossible. Differences over international affairs were to develop during the 1960s, but party structures, and the control they implied - despite a slight and short-lived liberalisation immediately after 1956, were to remain in place for another three decades, in Britain and Eastern Europe.

Chapter One

The development of the CPGB from 1920, and the influence upon it of the Soviet Union.

The bonds between the Soviet Union and the other parties of the international communist movement were complex. Obviously there were the strong ties of a common ideology and the solidarity of shared aspirations, but what may have started off as a fairly equal comradeship-in-arms fairly rapidly transformed into a different type of relationship. The failure of other revolutions to succeed within Europe meant that the Soviet Union, the only country trying to build socialism, must be defended at all costs. This determination to build up solidarity with the Soviet Union led to an increasing tendency to accept and argue for the policies put forward by the Soviet Communist Party.

The situation developed, unfortunately for the British party, where the policy needs of the Soviet Union came to dominate the political position of the CPGB, almost irrespective of the objective situation in Britain. This was not a situation that was always accepted lying down, however, as was shown in 1939, over the characterisation by the Soviet Union of the Second World War as an imperialist war, and their insistence that the CPGB follow suit, despite the longstanding battle of the CPGB against fascism.

Nevertheless, despite occasional opposition, the will of Moscow, as expressed via the Comintern, dominated the policy of the party. And on the whole the party was satisfied with this situation because of the high regard in which the Soviet Union was held, because of its great achievements in establishing socialism, despite the hostility of the rest of the world.

It was these two factors - the hostility of the rest of the world, and the great reverence in which the Soviet Union was held - which led to the episode which perhaps had the greatest impact in 1956. The Moscow trials of the 1930s, the execution and imprisonment of many thousands of communists, and perhaps millions of Soviet citizens all-told, were taken in good faith. Clearly the extent of the purges was not known then, and is perhaps only becoming clear today, but certainly they were considered to be genuine. In the light of these significant factors, it is therefore of great importance to look at the history of the CPGB up to 1956, with particular reference to its relationship

with the Soviet Union. Without understanding the nature of those bonds it is not easy to understand the impact of 1956.

History

When the Third International, or 'Comintern', was officially inaugurated in March 1919 to coordinate the international communist movement and its progress towards world revolution, there was no Communist Party in Britain, and no single organisation ready to take on membership of that body. The main working-class political organisation was the Labour Party, a body founded by the trade unions and a member of the Second, or Socialist International; it was an outspokenly anti-Marxist organisation which did not have a socialist programme until 1918. The leading socialist party was the Independent Labour Party which was also non-Marxist, although many of its members were sympathetic to its teachings. There were many small revolutionary groups, the most significant of which were the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party and the Workers' Socialist Federation. Considerable Marxist influence also came from the shop stewards' movement, particularly on Clydeside, from the National Guilds League, and from some amongst the South Wales miners. The Communist Unity Convention which was held in London in 1920, at the same time as the Second Congress of the Third International, founded a party which drew on all these groups for its membership, and consequently held many diverse views and traditions within its boundaries.

The Communist Party of Great Britain was from the outset a member of the Third International, but the tight control which the Comintern kept over its member parties was by no means readily accepted. The founding Congress of the British Party was dominated by an intense discussion over the attitude to be adopted towards parliament and the Labour Party. Immediately prior to the Congress, a letter had been received from Lenin, which stated,

'I personally am in favour of participation in parliament and of adhesion to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent communist activity.' 1.

Lenin was echoing his beliefs as stated in his 'Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder', which rebuked foreign communists who were unwilling to exploit the opportunities inherent within the parliamentary system. The pamphlet made it clear that communists should be flexible, being bound by neither left doctrinaireism nor right reformism, yet it also implied that, in line with the Twenty One Conditions for membership of the Comintern, adopted at the Second Congress, the policies of non-Soviet communists should be directed towards helping the young Soviet state. As one of the Conditions stipulated, the

'...duty of unconditional support of the Soviet republic is required of every would-be member party.' 2.

Despite its anti-communism, the Labour Party was strongly against the wars of intervention launched against Russia, and this influenced the Comintern approach towards that party, and Lenin was anxious that British communists should work with the Labour Party to defeat the proponents of intervention. The British communists held the leaders of the Labour Party to be appalling reformists and opportunists, and such was the ultra-leftism of many of its members, carried forward from their previous political organisations that the vote on seeking affiliation to the Labour Party was carried by only a small majority, despite Lenin's persuasive arguments in 'Left-Wing Communism'. At this stage, agreement with Moscow was by no means a foregone conclusion. As one delegate to the founding conference stated,

'on international affairs we will take our principles from Moscow, where they can be verified internationally; but on local affairs, where we are on the spot, we are the people to decide.' 3.

By 1922, such militant trends as had emerged in Britain in the wake of the Great War and the Russian Revolution had largely faded away, mostly due to the collapse of the post-war boom, and the onset of severe unemployment, which made it easy for employers to sift out activists and hence cripple the shop stewards' movement. The Comintern however, although not seeing this as a particularly favourable climate for revolution, also saw this as a failure of the British party due to its poor and non-revolutionary organisation. Thus followed in 1922 a complete restructuring of the party along the lines recommended by the Third Congress of the Comintern, in its

'Theses on the Structure of Communist Parties and on the Methods and Content of their Work'.

Nevertheless, the Comintern did change position from the attitudes of 1919-20; after the Third Congress, at its meeting in December 1921, the executive directed:

'the Communist International as a whole to support the slogan of the united front of the workers', 4.

and in January 1922 publicly called for:

'the establishment of a united front of all parties supported by the proletariat, regardless of the differences separating them, so long as they are anxious to wage a common fight for the immediate and urgent needs of the proletariat.' 5.

The British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, or Profintern, was set up in 1921 in an attempt to transform the trade unions into revolutionary organisations, but there was little progress, which was one aspect considered at a special commission being held in Moscow in June 1923, on the Communist Party of Great Britain. As a result of this, the British Bureau was phased out, in favour of bringing together existing rank-and-file industrial groups and setting up new ones wherever possible. This led eventually to the foundation of the National Minority Movement in 1924, which, basing

itself on the appeal of limited economic or 'transitional' demands, rallied a considerable amount of support.

At the Fifth Comintern Congress, the party was encouraged in relation to the NMM, but in 1924 the Comintern also introduced the policy of the 'united front from above', which brought British communists into a 'fraternal alliance' with leading trade unionists, and brought forward the party slogan 'All Power to the General Council' (meaning that of the British Trade Union Congress). This coincided with developments of Soviet foreign policy of the so-called 'third line', which authorised projects like the Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Council in 1925. Soviet policy makers at home, faced with the prospect of building 'socialism in one country' given the failure of revolutions in western Europe to materialise, were attempting to soothe liberal opinion abroad and open the ways to trade and recognition of the new state. To an extent the New Economic Policy of the Soviet Union encouraged people to believe this to be the case, and sympathetic responses were sought via enterprises like the Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Council which attempted to promote a mass workers' organisation, that whilst firmly rejecting communism, would also extend friendship towards the Soviet Union as a 'workers' state'.

There were problems, however, for the CPGB in attempting both to be a revolutionary party, and to work closely in alliance with leading trade unionists and the TUC General Council. This was thrown into sharp relief during what was perhaps the most significant event of the 1920s, the General Strike and Miners' Struggle of 1926, following

from the publication of the Report of the Samuel Commission on the Coal Industry on the 11th of March, 1926. This report proposed wage reductions and a reorganisation of the industry, but no nationalisation. The CPGB deemed the Report a 'declaration of war against the miners and the whole working-class movement', and pressed the view that it should be met with a General Strike if necessary. 6.

Whilst the CPGB urged preparation for the forthcoming struggle, it had a cautious approach to what was actually achievable, based on a fairly realistic understanding of the nature of the trade union leaderships. The party did not share the same illusions as Trotsky, who considered the situation to herald the coming revolution. 7. The CPGB's actual view was spelt out by J.T.Murphy in 'Workers' Weekly' on the 30th of April, 1926:

'Our party does not hold the leading positions in the trade unions...And let it be remembered that those who are leading have no revolutionary perspective before them. Any revolutionary perspectives they may perceive will send the majority of them hot on the track of a retreat...To entertain any exaggerated views as to the revolutionary possibilities of this crisis and visions of new leadership 'arising spontaneously in the struggle', etc. is fantastic.' 8.

Nevertheless, despite its realistic assessment of the situation, the CPGB went on to give incisive political leadership to the strike in contrast to the 'scarcely veiled opposition to the strike from the

leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the timidity and confusion of the leaders of the TUC General Council.' 9.

The Communist leadership backed three demands for the strike: firstly, no reduction in pay and no increase in hours; secondly, the nationalisation of the mines without compensation to the owners, under workers' control; and thirdly, the formation of a Labour government. As it turned out, Murphy's anxieties about the leadership of the TUC were entirely well-founded, for they unconditionally called the strike off on the 12th of May, although the CPGB was able to minimise some of the damage by encouraging local strike committees to remain in existence to negotiate local settlements. 10.

Palme Dutt, however, took a different perspective on the General Strike and rejected the political assessment put out at the time. He insisted that the strike was 'the first stage of the revolutionary struggle of the masses for power', and that it should be carried forward to the 'inevitable political revolutionary struggle', and that the Labour Party was 'rotten to the core with reformism' and unable to give any lead to the workers. 11.

Palme Dutt's perspective became the accepted version of the strike within the party and served as a basis, within British political experience, for the 'class against class' policy adopted by the Comintern in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1927, at the 15th Congress of the CPSU, Stalin announced, referring amongst other events, to the British General Strike, that:

'...all these facts undoubtedly indicate that Europe is entering a new period of revolutionary upsurge.' 12.

Within the Soviet Union during the period 1928-9, he embarked upon industrialisation and collectivisation and the 'liquidation of the kulaks as a class', and concurrently within the Comintern began the 'class-against-class' period, the 'sharpening of the class struggle'. The majority of the British leadership viewed the 'left' turn with serious apprehension, but it was accepted, although not without a struggle. Gallacher, one of the leading party members, was reluctant to give up the advice of Lenin over the Labour Party - he refused to see it as a 'third bourgeois party', and pointed out that the policy made a mockery of applications for affiliation by the Communist Party to the Labour Party.

Nevertheless, the line was eventually adopted, and the Labour Party was to become 'the second hostile camp', the 'twin brother of fascism', a policy that was disastrous for the British Communist Party, and even more so for the German Communist Party in its failure to recognise the Nazis as a more dangerous factor in German politics than the SPD. The policy was adopted by the CPGB in January 1929, but was criticised by the Comintern Executive for not being enthusiastic enough about the new policy. The eleventh party Congress at Leeds in December 1929 replaced the old leadership, with those who were considered most likely to carry out the Comintern line.

The General Election of May 1929 which returned a Labour government showed the indifference of the majority of the workers to party appeals. Palme Dutt, a leading member, had told them that the Labour Party was 'an integral part of the capitalist state', and Harry Pollitt, party general secretary asserted that it was impossible for any class-conscious worker to vote Labour. But these statements were obviously out of touch with reality, as were the attempts to create breakaway revolutionary trade unions.

The first move towards a change in the policy of the Comintern in regard to trade unions was initiated by the British Party in 1931. Pollitt argued, as he always did, that the work of the Party should be directed towards changing the attitude of the existing trade unions, not setting up breakaway unions. This was accepted by the ECCI, and so in January 1932 the Central Committee of the CPGB issued an official statement stressing the need to transform the existing trade unions from organs of class collaboration to organs of class struggle. On the wider political front, perhaps the first move towards openly changing policy came in March 1933, after Hitler's assumption of power, when the Socialist International offered better relations. The Comintern Executive recommended to individual parties to approach the social democrat leaders in their own countries with proposals for joint action against fascism. The British Party approached the Labour Party, TUC, Cooperative movement and the ILP for united action. The Labour Party Executive and the TUC rejected the approach; however, the ILP responded favourably.

So it was that, during 1933 and 1934, particularly under pressure from the French Communist Party and from Dimitrov, the Bulgarian hero of the Reichstag Fire trial, the Comintern began to discard its former sectarian policies. Recognition of the need for unity in the struggles against fascism, war and imperialism was confirmed at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August 1935. There was, however, no public recognition that the previous policy had been wrong, only that the situation had changed, and so therefore had the policy.

For the next few years, many on the Labour left, together with liberals and others besides Communists, thought more in terms of people's front politics - a unity in opposition to fascism and for progressive social policies. It showed a renaissance of the Left, perhaps most clearly demonstrated during the war in Spain during which the Communist Party not only recruited volunteers for service in the International Brigade but was a major driving force in a broadly-based movement for aid for Spain. And progress was also made in other fields such as housing and women's rights, as well as in more traditional forms of class struggle such as mining, engineering, passenger transport and among council tenants. New forms of anti-imperialist organisation were developed in the India League, the China Campaign Committee and a whole range of cultural activities. Between 1935 and 1939, Communist Party membership rose from 6,500 to 17,750; regular daily sales of the 'Daily Worker' rose from under 30,000 to between 70 and 80,000, with weekend sales considerably higher. 13.

Ironically, these were the years of most intense repression within the Soviet Union itself. These were the times during which there were,

'A whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of party principles, of party democracy, of revolutionary legality.' 14.

This was revealed by Khrushchev in the closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, along with the information that:

'...many party, Soviet and economic activists, who were branded in 1937-38 as 'enemies', were never actually enemies, spies, wreckers, etc., but were always honest Communists.' 15.

Yet the leadership and membership of the CPGB did not believe that there were miscarriages of justice in the Soviet Union, and such a belief was not confined to the British party. Milovan Djilas has commented:

'At the time I believed that Trotskyites, Bukharinites, and other oppositionists in the party were indeed spies and wreckers, and that therefore the drastic measures taken against them...were justified.' 16.

This view was also shared by Palmiro Togliatti - for nearly forty years the leader of the Italian Communist Party:

'There was nothing to cause the Communist leaders to doubt the sentences, particularly because they knew that, once discredited politically and in the eyes of the mass of the people, the leaders of the old opposition groups were not above continuing the struggle with terroristic methods.' 17.

The view that the charges levelled against the accused were true was totally accepted by the party faithful. For many years the bogey of Trotskyism had been inflated and made capable of many crimes against socialism in one country. Party literature had not spared Trotsky. Accusations were even made which minimised Trotsky's role with the Red Army. In an article in the 'Daily Worker' under the heading 'Trotsky Terror - the Truth, Trotsky was No Great General', Ralph Fox wrote a reply to:

'honest workers and intellectuals who cannot 'understand' the transformation of Trotsky from a leader of the October Revolution to the head of a gang of terrorist gunmen in alliance with the Fascist Secret Police.' 18.

Fox, who was killed in action in Spain in 1937, asserted that Trotsky's defects were many and serious, and considered him to be a failure as a war organiser. He used an analogy comparing Trotsky to Kitchener - for political reasons, he explained, the failures of neither could be exposed at the time, but now the truth could be told. He gave the credit for the actual work done at the fronts to Stalin, and in Moscow to Lenin.

Trotsky himself did nothing to lessen the fear that organised attempts were being made to undermine the Soviet state, by boasting at the beginning of 1936, during his attempt to build up the Fourth International:

'It can be said with confidence that in spite of thirteen years of persecution...the Fourth International possesses already today its strongest, most numerous and most hardened branch in the USSR.' 19.

In any case, looking with optimism to the Soviet experiment was not something that was confined to Communists. With the onset of the depression in the late 1920s and the despair of the following period, many followed with interest the progress of the First Five Year Plan and its apparent successes - its planning with the welfare of the people in mind. Sidney and Beatrice Webb dealt positively with the Soviet system in their 'Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?', which was republished later in the 1930s without the question mark. The postscript to the 1937 edition explained why the question mark had been removed - clearly the Webbs felt that a new civilisation had been born, for they commented thus on Soviet society:

'The civilian acts in his factory or farm according to the same scale of values as he does in his family, in his sports, or in his voting at elections. the secular and religious are one. The only good life at which he aims is a life that is good for all his fellow men, irrespective of age or sex, religion or race.' 20.

Another event which added to the positive image of the Soviet Union was the adoption of the Stalin Constitution. It was adopted in November 1936, only months after the execution of Zinoviev and Kamenev; drawn up by a commission which included Bukharin and Radek, it was hailed as 'the most democratic in the world'. It included guarantees of freedom from arbitrary arrest, inviolability of the home and secrecy of correspondence, freedom of speech, of the press, of meetings and of demonstrations. In practice it was meaningless. As Khrushchev pointed out in his 'Secret Speech', when the cases of those arrested during this period as 'spies' and 'saboteurs' were examined:

'it was found that all their cases were fabricated. Confessions of guilt of many arrested and charged with enemy activity were gained with the help of cruel and inhuman tortures.' 21.

Nevertheless, the Stalin Constitution was an impressive document. One eminent figure of the time, D.N.Pritt, KC, MP, remarked that:

'both in spirit and in its actual provisions it goes a very long way further...to the fuller establishment of that personal freedom and security to which many of us attach very great importance.' 22.

D.N.Pritt actually played quite a significant role in winning liberal public opinion, and perhaps confirming Communist opinion, in favour of the veracity of the trials. He was present at the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev and others in August 1936, and on his return to

Britain, testified that there was no sign whatsoever that any of the prisoners had suffered ill-treatment:

'it seems plain to me, on a number of different grounds, that anything in the nature of forced confessions is intrinsically impossible.' 23.

Even one conservative English Sunday paper ran a report from its Moscow correspondent that:

'It is futile to think that the trial was staged and the charges trumped up. The Government's case against the defendants is genuine.' 24.

Under such circumstances it is hardly surprising that those, such as members of the CPGB, who were already predisposed to view Soviet affairs favourably, were unquestioning in their support for Stalin and their belief that the trials were completely necessary for the defence of the Soviet state.

On 8 June 1943, during the wartime alliance between Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, the Comintern was formally liquidated. Naturally the Allied leaders were pleased by this development - the removal of the organisation committed to fostering world revolution. Stalin was replacing the call for proletarian internationalism with an appeal to nationalism and patriotism. In doing this, he was also leaving the way open for the communist

parties of Europe to participate in, or even lead governments after the war, without the taint of being stooges of Moscow. In some senses as well the Soviet Union no longer needed the Comintern to further the interests of its own policy. As a member of the wartime Grand Alliance, and the victor of Stalingrad, the Soviet Union could negotiate from a position of strength as a great power. Consider for example the division of south east Europe, as arranged personally by Stalin and Churchill in Moscow in October 1944:

'The moment was apt for business, so I said, 'Let us settle about our affairs in the Balkans...So far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have ninety per cent predominance in Roumania, for us to have ninety per cent of the say in Greece, and go fifty-fifty about Yugoslavia?'

When Churchill had written down these proposals, and others for Hungary and Bulgaria on a sheet of paper, he pushed them across to Stalin, who had by then heard the translation.

'There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us. It was all settled in no more time than it takes to set down.' 25.

The Cominform and the Post-war Period

The anti-Soviet foreign policies of the post-war British and American governments and the launch of the anti-Communist Truman doctrine in America early in 1947 paved the way for the formation in September

1947 of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform). This organisation bore no resemblance to the Comintern which had represented about sixty parties from all over the world. It was confined to a group of nine parties: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, six parties from the countries of Eastern Europe, together with only two from Western Europe - France and Italy. The CPGB was not part of it; its alleged object was to disseminate information, and for this purpose it issued a fortnightly paper, 'For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy'. 'For, for', as it became known, was generally considered to be turgid, even by the standards of heavy and badly-translated materials that communists had become used to from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it was through 'For, for' that the main ideological and controlling thrusts came from Moscow in the years prior to Stalin's death.

Although when it came to internal or colonial affairs the CPGB appeared to have established its independence (although George Matthews' testimony on the writing of 'The British Road to Socialism' throws a question mark over this: see below), when it came to relationships with other countries it was still completely influenced by the attitudes of the Soviet Union and followed the leads given by the Cominform. Take for example the response of the CPGB to the Tito/Cominform split, when they almost immediately lined up with the Cominform position. Pollitt himself virtually admitted in 1948 that the only reason the CPGB supported the criticisms of Tito was because leading Cominform figures thought they were correct. The party had no direct knowledge of reasons to endorse the escalation of the

campaign against Tito in 1949 with his labelling as a Trotskyite or agent of imperialism, but nevertheless gave this position full support. The same was true during the trials of communists such as Rajk and Slansky; they were condemned out of hand for much the same reasons.

Ideological changes were made as well, notably after the declaration made by Andrei Zhdanov at the first Cominform Conference in September 1947, that the world was now divided into two hostile camps:

'Two camps came into being, the imperialist anti-democratic camp with the basic aim of establishing world domination of American imperialism and routing democracy, and the anti-imperialist democratic camp with the basic aim of disrupting imperialism, strengthening democracy, and eliminating the remnants of Fascism.'

26.

Further to this, Zhdanov even drew a parallel between US policy in 1947, and the Nazi threat of the 1930s:

'the Munich policy in the past untied the hands of Hitlerite aggression, and in just the same way concessions to the new policy of the USA and the imperialist camp can make its inspirers still more bare-faced. 27.

In August 1947, the CPGB had published 'Looking Ahead' by Harry Pollitt, which outlined an alternative strategy for revolutionary change in Britain, which was to form the basis of 'The British Road

to Socialism' of 1951. It argued that each country must find its own road to socialism, and that in Britain this would be through peaceful transformation of parliament and the state, and not through civil war and the establishment of soviets. The tone of the pamphlet, whilst critical of the right-wing Labour leadership, was not particularly hostile to Labour. In contrast, Pollitt's 'Communism and Labour' of 1949, directly echoes much of Zhdanov's two camps theme, and makes much of the differences between social democracy and Marxism-Leninism.

The Communist Party had been critically supportive of the Labour Party since 1945, and had participated in increased production drives in support of the Labour government. The anti-communism that came with the onset of the Cold War period in 1947 made this a much more difficult position to sustain, and the Party had already begun to be critical of aspects of Labour policy - particularly foreign policy - before the 'two camps' statement. However, the Cominform declaration gave the green light for those conflicts to be elevated to a lofty ideological stance. In December 1947, Harry Pollitt made a statement following the Executive Committee meeting to the effect that, with the Labour government clearly an active member of the imperialist camp, it was necessary for important changes to be made to Communist Party policy to meet this situation. This clearly marked the end of the post-war co-operation with Labour.

The weaknesses of such a position were accurately highlighted in 1956, in the July edition of 'Marxist Quarterly', in an article by Bob Davies, entitled 'The New Stage in Soviet Democracy':

'In my opinion Zhdanov's report showed insufficient realisation that something in the nature of a 'third camp' might emerge, consisting of peace-loving states not committed to either the socialist or imperialist camp...this underestimation of the new elements in the post-war international situation was a major cause of the mistakes which were made in internal policy within the socialist camp. It encouraged the conclusion that the theory of the 'intensification of the class struggle', which had been advanced in the USSR in the pre-war period...was still appropriate in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe after the war. This view, together with the belief that there was serious danger of war, was the basis of the relentless drive against 'Titoism' in Eastern Europe.' 28.

Notes:

1. 'History of the Communist Party of Great Britain', Volume One, James Klugmann, London, 1969, page 39.
2. 'Proceedings of the Second World Congress', CPGB, London, 1920.
3. 'Communist Unity Convention', Official Report, CPGB, London, 1920, page 35.
4. 'The Communist International, 1919-43: Documents', Jane Degras, London, Volume One, page 311.
5. Ibid., page 317.
6. 'The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929', L.J.Macfarlane, London, 1966, page 161.
7. Ibid., page 162.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., page 164.
10. Ibid., page 165.
11. Ibid., page 166-7.

12. 'Stalin's Collected Works', Volume 10, Moscow, 1954, page 291
13. 'History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-41',
Noreen Branson, London, 1985, pages 130, 188, 191.
14. 'The Secret Speech', N.S.Khrushchev, Nottingham, 1976, page 19.
15. Ibid., page 33.
16. 'Conversations with Stalin', Milovan Djilas, New York, 1962, page
58.
17. Interview with 'Nuovi Argomenti' (1956), from 'On Gramsci and
Other Writings', Palmiro Togliatti, London, 1979, page 137.
18. 'Daily Worker'(DW), 28 August 1936.
19. 'Stalin', Isaac Deutscher, London, 1966, page 368.
20. 'Left Review', November, 1937.
21. 'The Secret Speech', Khrushchev, page 39.
22. 'The Zinoviev Trial', D.N.Pritt, London, 1936, page 36.
23. Ibid., page 12.

24. 'The Autobiography of D.N.Pritt', Part One, London, 1965, page 111.

25. 'The Second World War', Volume Six, 'Triumph and Tragedy', Winston S. Churchill, London, 1954, pages 194-5.

26. 'World News and Views'(WN&V), xxvii, page 463.

27. 'The Marxist Quarterly', July 1956, page 187.

28. Ibid., pages 187-8.

Chapter Two

Cominform Excesses

There was a significant difference between the role and status - actual and psychological - of the Comintern and the Cominform. The Comintern was the creation of Lenin and the great Bolsheviks, formed to unite workers' parties in all countries in their struggle to overthrow capitalism. One of its early aims was of course to rally to the defence of the newly established Soviet Union against attacks from a hostile capitalist world but it was also a living organisation of international solidarity as evidenced by its contribution to the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. Persecution of leading foreign comrades in exile in the Soviet Union was scarcely known of abroad. In short the Comintern stood for all that was noble and heroic in the communist movement.

The Cominform was very different. It was a small bureaucratic organisation, and was primarily a bringer of bad tidings. Certainly it carried news of the developments in the People's Democracies in glowing terms, but it also began to carry more and more reports of treachery in the communist movement. There was very little scepticism about these reports within the party, although because of closer contact for a variety of reasons mentioned below, there was greater possible access to the truth than there had been in the 1930s. But certainly the leadership of the CPGB never wavered in its support of the Cominform. This inevitably reflected badly on the leadership in

1956, when the crimes and excesses of the Cominform period were made known, as well as those of the 1930s.

The Tito/Cominform Split

During 1948, Tito, the Yugoslav communist leader who had successfully led the wartime resistance movement against the Nazis and against the royalist quasi-resistance of Mihailovich, was demoted from his position within the international communist movement as revolutionary hero, and during 1949 was branded as Trotskyite and agent of imperialism. It is arguably the case that he was ousted from the ranks because Stalin could not bear a rival independent centre of communism that had not arisen at least primarily through Soviet intervention - as was the case generally speaking in the other communist-led countries. However, the case initially argued against Tito and other Yugoslav leaders was a theoretical one, largely based on his contraventions of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy.

The forum for this denunciation was 'For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy', as they were taken to task not ostensibly by the Soviet Party or by Stalin, but by the whole communist fraternity of the Cominform. The news broke in Britain on the 29 June, 1948, with a 'Daily Worker' headline: 'Nine Parties Bureau attacks Yugoslavs'.

'Very strong criticisms of the policy of the Yugoslav Communist Party have been made in a communique of the Communist Information Bureau issued after their meeting which took place in Romania in mid-June. The meeting was held to discuss the situation in the Yugoslav

Communist Party and it reached the conclusion that their Party's tactics have been 'inept, false and demagogic'.

The 'incorrect policy' of the party was blamed in large measure upon the Yugoslav delegates to the Bureau, Eduard Kardelj, M. Djilas and A. Rankovic...

...The Soviet and other Communist Parties had sent a series of 'brotherly critiques' to the Yugoslavs this spring, but...the Yugoslav leaders were afflicted with ambition, grandeeism and cunning calculation.' 1.

The communique also accused the Yugoslav party of deserting the internationalist traditions of Communism, and acting on the principle that 'capitalist states represent less danger for the independence of Yugoslavia than the Soviet Union'. Whilst expelling the Yugoslav party from the Cominform, they also appealed to what they considered the 'healthy core' of the Yugoslav party to 'bring its leaders to see the error of their ways'.

In the second edition of the 'Daily Worker' on 29 June, Tito himself was specifically named as one of those responsible, and the report further stated that the communique spoke of a dictatorship within the Yugoslav party which avoided elections, criticism and self-criticism, and showed an anti-Sovietism which was inconsistent with Marxism and suited only to nationalism:

'They adopted a 'rancorous attitude towards the Soviet Communist Party', employing 'slandorous propaganda from the arsenal of counter-revolutionary Trotskyism'. 2.

The following day, the 'Daily Worker' printed the full Cominform statement, and also in the late edition, the rejection of the Cominform criticisms by the Yugoslav party. But by 1 July there was news of messages of support for the Cominform declaration flooding in from various Communist parties, including the French, and one from the Polish party which referred to a 'Fuehrer complex' in Belgrade. The view of the British Party leadership was made known in the press on 2 July, giving the unanimous approval of the party's Political Committee to the Cominform resolution. The statement also echoed the hope that the Yugoslav party would throw off its leaders and reassert Marxism-Leninism:

'It is confident that the rank and file membership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia will correct the errors of its leadership and will respond to the suggestions of brother Communist Parties, to make all the necessary changes for the fulfilment of the principles of Marxism-Leninism in the policy and practice of the Yugoslav Party.'

3.

The editorial comment of the 'Daily Worker' did not adopt such moderate tones as did the Political Committee statement however:

'...With an extraordinary display of arrogance the party leaders disregard the mighty experiences of the Soviet Union in the building of socialism; they even take a hostile attitude to the Soviet leaders.

As a result they have committed a number of errors with regard to the peasants, small producers and shopkeepers which are having a harmful effect on Yugoslav economy. In the international sphere the country is in danger of coming under imperialistic influences...

The Yugoslav party...has become a kind of semi-legal organisation, run by a clique which cultivates those military methods of leadership once favoured by Trotsky.' 4.

Nevertheless, such a volte face, completely unexpected by the ordinary party member - and indeed by the entire British Party - meant that the questions and anxieties of the members had to be answered. On 7 July 1948, an aggregate meeting of the London District Communist Party was held, at which Harry Pollitt himself spoke. Trying to avoid the kind of vitriolic outpourings that some of the other parties were engaging in, Pollitt adopted a tone of comradely criticism:

'I want to make it clear at the outset that the presentation of our standpoint this evening will in no way seek to damp down the enthusiasm which all of us have felt for the constructive achievements of the Yugoslav republic; nor will it aim in any way to weaken the bond of friendship between the people of Britain and Yugoslavia: rather, it will be an attempt to show exactly what are

the political criticisms which some of the most responsible leaders of Communist Parties in the world have felt it necessary to make in connection with the Yugoslav situation.' 5.

Pollitt drew attention to four editorial articles in recent editions of 'For, for', which as he himself said, were 'an ideological preparation' for the showdown with the Yugoslav party. These four articles contained the very arguments that were used against Tito and his fellow leaders. The first was 'The Ideological Weapon of the Communist Parties - Marxism-Leninism', and the crux of the argument was the following:

'...Lack of interest in Marxist theory and neglect of propaganda work may lead to degeneration and to the appearance of bourgeois views. Petty-bourgeois complacency and conceit inevitably come to the surface in such organisations and those communists who ignore theory fail to see the sharpening of the class struggle, the differentiation within the class forces and the manoeuvres of the enemy; they begin to let matters slide and harbour opportunist illusions that everything will turn out alright and that one way or another Socialism will be victorious.

Party organisations whose leaders are luke-warm propagandists of Marxist theory inevitably lose all sense of perspective and one can expect the most extravagant and pseudo-Marxist 'ideas' and 'theories'. Moreover in those instances pseudo-Marxism is usually camouflaged by left phrasemongering.' 6.

It is interesting to see that Stalin's own particular contribution to Leninism, the theory of the intensification of class struggle, is used here against Tito. This theory was used against Bukharin and other 'right deviationists' during the 1930s, and was the major theoretical underpinning for the purges. Stalin outlines this theory in several of the speeches and articles which comprise the volume 'Leninism', for many years almost the bible of British communists. His first reference to the theory in 'Leninism' comes in 'The Right Deviation in the CPSU(B)', a speech delivered to the Plenum of the Central Committee in April 1929, although the theory itself was first outlined in July 1928, in Stalin's speech to the CC Plenum entitled 'Industrialisation and the Grain Problem'. Speaking of capitalist elements in the Soviet Union, Stalin commented:

'...And they are still able to increase their resistance not only because world capitalism is supporting them, but also because, in spite of the decline in their relative importance...there is still an absolute growth of the capitalist elements, and this, to a certain extent, enables them to accumulate forces to resist the growth of Socialism. It is on this basis that, at the present stage of development and with the present relation of forces, the intensification of the class struggle and the increase in the resistance of the capitalist elements of town and country is taking place.' 7.

The second 'For, for' article was entitled 'Strengthen the Militant Alliance of Workers and Peasants!'

'...Anyone who fails to see the class differentiation in the countryside, who ignores the danger coming from the capitalist elements, who glosses over the class struggle in the countryside is slipping into the opportunist position of extinguishing the class struggle, whether he likes it or not, and is upholding the rotten theory of the peaceful growth of the capitalist elements into socialism. Anyone who is blind to the class struggle in the countryside and slurs over it, endangers the alliance of the working class and the building of socialism in the new democracies.' 8.

The third article was aimed specifically at the dangers of People's Frontism:

'The Communist Parties - the Vanguard Detachment of the Working People'

'...Since the People's Front has become a mass organisation of the working people in a number of countries it would be dangerous on these grounds to identify the Party with the People's Front or to place the Party in a subordinate position to the People's Front. This would inevitably lead to the Party ceasing to be the vanguard and leading force of the working people.' 9.

Pollitt actually identified this as the main problem - the incorrect attitude of the Yugoslav leaders to the role of the Party, and a persistence, as he perceived it, in the Party being subsumed in the People's Front. To illustrate the guilt of the Yugoslav Party in this instance, he drew the attention of the meeting to a speech Tito had made, in which he stated:

'Since the People's Front best of all represents not only the political unity of our people, but also fraternity and unity in the national sense, it cannot be replaced by any other political party. Hence the People's Front is becoming the permanent political organisation of the people.' 10.

The final article prepared the ground for the ferocious attacks that were to follow - and made it clear that resistance to criticism would be an additional crime:

'Self-Criticism - the keen weapon of the Communist and Workers' Parties'

'...An incorrect attitude to criticism is expressed in the fact that instead of admitting and correcting mistakes, criticism is taken subjectively, as an affront to prestige, an insult to the ambitions and reputation of one or another official, leader of an organisation, and so on. This attitude by no means strengthens the party organisations. Nor does it promote the proper education of cadres. On the contrary, it is extremely dangerous to the life and development of the Party...'. 11.

In his address to the London District Aggregate, Pollitt dealt in some detail with the Cominform resolution, and also answered questions from the floor. In response to criticism about the timing of the attack on a socialist country - the position in Berlin, the eve of the Finnish election, the debates and discussions on the Marshall Plan - Pollitt pointed out that it was correct because the

Yugoslav Congress was scheduled for 21 July, and there was some hope that the Congress delegates would put its leadership 'straight'.

But perhaps the weakest position that Pollitt took was falling back on the status of the people who took the decision against the Yugoslav party, as an argument that it must be right:

'...there lies behind the criticisms and formulations of the Information Bureau the vast experience of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which, since 1917, has time and time again had itself to deal with such questions, as well as the authoritative character of the other communist signatories...Men like Rakosi, never out of prison for 15 years; men like Slansky, who was tortured in Dachau, are not men who 'turn when Joe says turn'. Their record in the Communist movement is of such a character as to prove, to me at any rate, that when their signatures go on a document...(it) is correct.'

12.

There seems a terrible irony in this, considering the fate that was to befall Slansky only a few years later, and the attacks that were made on him in the pages of the same periodical. On the whole, however, Pollitt adopted a moderate tone on the matter - which was to be superseded by a more scornful and hostile attitude after the 2nd Cominform resolution on Yugoslavia in 1949. On the occasion of the Sixth Congress of the Yugoslav Party, James Klugmann wrote an article about what he referred to as the Congress of 'Tito's phoney 'Communist' Party':

'It was in the capitalist press and the press of the right wing Labour leaders that Tito's phoney Congress were most favourably reported. The Times editorialists could see Tito as they saw Trotsky before him as the heir to Marx, author of the 'new kind of Communism'. But to Socialists and democrats it has become increasingly clear that Tito has sold out his country to US reaction, that Yugoslav economy is in a catastrophic position, that Tito-Yugoslavia has become a US war base, that the Yugoslav people are developing their opposition to Tito's regime, that even in the ranks of the topmost Titoites there is growing confusion. Tito's 'Marxism', is a 'Marxism' that moves the monopolists to raptures of delight, his 'new kind of Communism' captivates capitalists only.' 13.

In fact it was James Klugmann, one of the Party's leading theoreticians who was instructed to write 'From Trotsky to Tito', a book published in 1951, which went into considerable detail to argue the case against Tito's Yugoslavia. The detail only served to underline the existing position:

'...How was it that these errors had come to be committed? Were they simply mistakes of policy or was there something else behind them? Why did British and American reaction seem to attach so much importance to the Tito clique? How could such a group of men as the Yugoslav Communist leaders around Tito refuse to discuss criticisms made by other fraternal Parties? What explanation could be behind the totally un-Communist behaviour of the Yugoslav Communist leaders?

Those questions did not receive a full answer until the Rajk, Kostov and Kochi Xoxe trials showed that the mistakes of the Titoites were part of a conscious, counter-revolutionary plan of direct agents of Anglo-American imperialism.' 14.

Thus was the case put and argued by the Party leadership, loyal and in line with the second Cominform resolution, going to extremes of denunciation where necessary. An alternative view comes from Kay Beauchamp, a party member since 1923, one of the founders of the 'Daily Worker', and a communist councillor in London in the post-war period.

'I visited Yugoslavia in 1946, and we were rather shocked by the seeming lack of any planning, of any Marxist education - a kind of reliance on spontaneity. We thought it rather arrogant, and it irritated us - they seemed to think they had all the answers. So when the Cominform declaration was made, many people agreed with the theoretical criticisms, but we didn't agree with the wild extremes of the denunciations - we thought it was unnecessary. But there seemed to have been that tendency within the communist movement anyway - to extremes both of praise and condemnation. Look for example at the cult of the individual - someone can do no wrong, and then suddenly they can be completely denounced. A lot of people put this down to the Russian nature - we drew parallels with Russian literature. But it meant of course that when Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956 some people didn't really believe all the things that were said about him,

because some of us had never particularly adulated him either. We considered it yet more extremism of the same type.' 15.

The post-war period did not provide quite the same secure setting for showtrials as the 1930s in Moscow had done, because there had been more contact through the war and particularly the Spanish Civil War, with communists from Eastern Europe. This aspect was perhaps most marked during the trials of the early 1950s.

The Trials of Rajk and Slansky

The first anti-Titoite trial was that of Laszlo Rajk, the Foreign Minister of Hungary, in 1949. He was executed for 'Titoism, treason, and espionage for the imperialists'. Whether these trials were carried out at the bidding of Moscow, or for domestic reasons, they had a powerful impact on Communist Party members. Rajk was followed by leading communists in other countries - Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria and Rudolf Slansky in Czechoslovakia. Anna Pauker and Vasile Luca in Romania and Wladyslaw Gomulka in Poland were also tried and sentenced by their parties, although not in public.

In 1949, the Communist Party of Great Britain published 'Tito's Plot Against Europe', by Derek Kartun, a 'Daily Worker' journalist who was present throughout the Rajk trial. In the foreword to the book, Kartun states:

'So very much stranger than fiction is this narrative of the Rajk conspiracy that I feel it necessary to say a word about my sources. I have not invented, assumed, elaborated or modified any of the facts in these pages.' 16.

Kartun relies, as he goes on to say, on the official Blue Book, 'Laszlo Rajk and His Accomplices Before the People's Court', issued by the Hungarian Government after the trial. It is indeed understandable that Kartun should wish to make this statement, for the supposed facts of the case are farfetched to put it mildly.

'Tito's Plot Against Europe' weaves the most complex and fantastic story implicating many communists, and in particular Rajk, in a web of espionage and subterfuge. The story covers involvement in years of work on behalf of imperialist powers and even the Gestapo, and fully 'explains' how first Trotskyites and then Titoites were supposed agents of international reaction. Much effort is made to show how the Spanish Civil War was a recruiting ground for imperialist agents, and in particular how Rajk worked at Gurs and Vernet, the camps in France for prisoners of war from the Spanish Republican forces.

'At Vernet he (Rajk) met Enrique Gironella, deputy secretary-general of POUM (the Spanish Trotskyist Party), who had escaped from a death sentence delivered by the People's Court in Barcelona and was later helped by the French secret service to reach Mexico. Rajk also met a number of leading Yugoslav Trotskyists. A Trotskyist group existed, too, among the Hungarians...

'Rajk carried on Trotskyist propaganda in the camps, together with these individuals, and in recalling the event ten years later he was to describe this Trotskyism as 'the refutation and disruption of everything which is in the interests of the revolutionary working class movement, on a political basis that completely lacked all principle'.' 17.

By this time, there was no worse accusation than that of Trotskyism; it had ceased to be a label applied merely to a particular 'deviation' within communism, and was now seen as an adjunct to fascism. Contrast for example the attitude in the 1930s to that of the 1940s.

In 1937, during the Moscow Trials, Marjorie Pollitt, the wife of Harry Pollitt, wrote a pamphlet entitled 'Defeat of Trotskyism', which showed how Trotskyist policies, and their opposition to socialism in one country actually aided and abetted the enemies of socialism. The primary accusation was not that they were consciously allies of fascism as such, but that their behaviour had that effect:

'Not only in the Soviet Union, but in Spain, in France, even in Britain, the Trotskyists start with completely wrong theories and finish as disrupters of the working-class movement and as allies of fascism.' 18.

A pamphlet issued in 1943 by John Mahon, later to be London District Secretary, entitled 'Hitler's Agents Exposed!', had rather a

different tone. Trotskyites are explicitly accused of being Hitler's agents, 'his Fifth Column':

'They are at work to weaken the will of the people for victory. They sow dissension, try to slow down production, and want to break up national anti-fascist unity. They are busy not only in high places, but also in the factories and the labour movement.' 19.

The pamphlet includes sections on 'Trotsky Never the Colleague of Lenin' and 'Trotsky Became an Agent of Hitler', and draws comparisons between the attitude of the Trotskyist press to the war, and that of a radio station called 'Workers' Challenge' which they refer to as 'Hitler's radio':

- '(1) Hitler's radio and the Trotskyite 'Socialist Appeal' adopt an identical attitude towards the war.
- (2) Both declare it an imperialist war.
- (3) Both declare that the British working class should organise a general strike for the overthrow of the present Churchill Government and for its replacement by a Worker's Government...
- (4) Any attempt to follow this policy would immediately imperil Britain's war effort and would open the way to a Hitler conquest of Britain, in which the British working class would be reduced to the level of slaves to fascism.' 20.

Trotskyites have now become the conscious allies of fascism. So it follows that Trotskyites are the agents of fascism and imperialism,



and Titoites as Derek Kartun's book so clearly 'proves', are merely the same animal under a different name. This renders them traitors of the worst kind, not merely political deviationists, and their execution becomes not only necessary but a matter of urgency.

Perhaps the most famous trial ensuing in the anti-Tito period was that of Rudolf Slansky in 1952, although the anti-Tito element was not as significant in this trial as it had been in those of Rajk and Kostov. Slansky had had an outstanding communist career; he had joined the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1921, and spent the war years in Moscow. In 1944 he returned to Slovakia and joined the partisans, becoming General Secretary of the Party after liberation. In 1951, he was arrested, and went on trial in Prague on 20 November of that year, accused of being a Trotskyite, a Titoite and most terribly, a Zionist.

In 'World News and Views' of 13 December 1952, under the title 'The Czechoslovak Trial', Sam Russell reported on the recently concluded trial of Slansky and thirteen others, including Otto Sling who had been associated with the Czech Refugee Trust Fund, set up in Britain in 1938. Russell explained the by now familiar formula of being agents for US and British imperialism and part of the Titoite conspiracy.

This official view was not subscribed to by all party members however. Take for example the attitude of Patience Edney, who had been a nurse for the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War, and was in Prague in 1952 on her way to do a Party job in China:

'When I came back from Spain, I had worked for the Czech Refugee Trust Fund, and came to know many of the Czech refugees very well indeed. Many of them were communists, and many were Jews. One of them was Otto Sling, who married an English woman - and I also knew him from Spain, because he'd been a Commandant in the Czech Battalion of the International Brigade. After the Second World War ended, the Czechs went back to their country full of enthusiasm, overjoyed at a new start. Within five years they were being denounced as English spies - Sling himself was on trial when we were in Prague and was subsequently shot.

'The International Brigaders suffered disproportionately in those post-war trials, because they'd been out of the country and therefore supposedly open to evil influences. There was a very unpleasant anti-semitic streak in all of this as well.' 21.

As Sam Russell pointed out in his article:

'A big feature of the trial was the way in which it exposed the treacherous role of the Israeli government and its diplomats in Czechoslovakia, and the use of Zionist organisations as a cover for some of the worst espionage and sabotage actions against the Czechoslovak state and people. Of the fourteen on trial, eleven were of Jewish origin, and their links with Zionism and its agents were constantly referred to and proved with documentary evidence. 'The trial has shown all Communist Parties,' said the Prosecutor, 'the danger of Zionist organisations as nests of American spies.' ' 22.

Sam Russell was himself Jewish and did not consider anti-semitism to be a factor in the trials, which clearly helped to reassure some of those who had anxieties about these allegations. The official Czech statements made it quite clear that it considered the charges of anti-semitism to be a cover to attempt to conceal the real activity of the spies and saboteurs, and Russell supported this position. This attitude did however, provoke considerable unease and indeed some outrage within the CPGB, and the British Party attempted to head off this response by printing an article in the following issue, entitled 'Zionism and the Warmongers', prepared by the Jewish Committee of the Communist Party:

'The conviction of Slansky and his associates for plotting against the Czechoslovak state is a victory for the Czech people and the cause of peace...The fact that eleven of the fourteen conspirators were of bourgeois Jewish origin, and the trial proved beyond doubt the complicity of the Zionist organisation and Israeli Government in the plot, has led the capitalist press to conduct a hysterical campaign alleging that the character of the trial was anti-semitic.'

Having drawn the links between Zionism and reaction, the article went on to say that:

'British Jews have a responsibility for helping to expose the slanderous campaign being conducted by the press against the Czechoslovak Republic. Rabbi Sichl's statement (Chief Rabbi of Czechoslovakia) that the allegations are complete nonsense and that

'there is no such thing as oppression of the Jewish religion in Czechoslovakia', together with the fact that only in the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies is anti-semitism a crime punishable by law, must be made known far and wide.' 23.

Despite such attempts, the accusation of anti-semitism was not adequately answered, least of all by Harry Pollitt, in his article entitled, 'Why the Czech Trial?'

'A number of comrades have written in to ask, 'What is your opinion as to how such trials as those in Czechoslovakia came about?' I offer a few remarks to help the comrades who may have to answer questions at public meetings or arguments in the factories.

'I think that all of us have tended to forget the age-long history of the class struggle, and especially the fact that not only does the ruling class never give up its efforts to retain its power, but even after losing it, redoubles its activities to try and win it back again.' 24.

Pollitt went on to refer to the 'red herring of anti-semitic accusations' and zionism being 'a pawn of US imperialism', and urged upon party members the need to be vigilant, critical and self-critical.

Hardly a satisfactory response, and this whole question of anti-semitism was to return with a vengeance in 1956.

'Defending the indefensible'

There is no full official version published by the CPGB of this period of its history, although in 1980, the party did publish a large pictorial pamphlet 'All For The Cause', to mark 60 years of the party. This was written by George Matthews, who was Assistant General Secretary in 1956. In referring to 1956 as a 'Watershed Year', he speaks of the crimes and injustices of the Stalin period, but refers to this Cominform period in only one sentence, 'Repressions and rigged trials in other socialist countries after the war are later revealed.' Matthews then goes on to say:

'The party recognises that in popularising the great achievements of socialism and combatting anti-Soviet hysteria it has also, in ignorance of the full facts, often tried to defend the indefensible. It expresses its profound regret for these serious mistakes.' 25.

It is interesting to contrast this position with that put forward in the CPGB's new strategy document 'Manifesto for New Times'. Although the position of Matthews could be criticised because it fails to draw out the point that during the post-war period, fuller information could have been sought and a more balanced position taken on the Cominform trials, his position is fully in keeping with the Communist Party's approach to the Soviet Union, and shows a clear understanding of the CPGB's historical role and responsibility.

This is not the case with 'Manifesto for New Times', which shows a marked desire to distance itself from its Comintern and Cominform

past. Whilst a charitable reading would see this as wishful thinking, it could also, because of incorrect emphasis, be deemed a partial rewrite of history. For example, in speaking of the development of the party, it states:

'Its activity and development have been influenced by several traditions: the Levellers, the Chartists and Utopian Socialists; the labour movement, the unions and co-operative movement; the Leninist tradition and the Third International; and finally the new social movements and their networks in society.' 26.

The implication here seems to be that these traditions have carried equal weight within the CPGB, whereas a study of Communist Party history shows that certainly by the end of the 1920s, Comintern influence and control was virtually absolute. Furthermore, this dominance was accepted, even welcomed - the test of a true communist was how much you stood up for the Soviet Union.

In referring to the Communist Party's attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party in the early years, the Manifesto goes on to state:

'(Rejection) was mainly due to the party's membership of and adherence to the Communist International, many of whose decisions in the late 1920s and early 1930s were determined by Stalinist thinking and were wrong and harmful to left unity and the work of the British and other communist parties.' 27.

What exactly is meant here by 'Stalinist thinking', and 'wrong and harmful'? Does this refer to 'socialism in one country'? Or the intensification of class struggle? Or perhaps to democratic centralism? Apart from that there is no comment whatsoever on the historical links between the CPGB and the Soviet Union, apart from a passing reference to the 20th Congress:

'In the postwar years, but especially since the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956, the party has increasingly opposed Stalinist thinking and practices. It has tried, albeit often too slowly, to root decisively its political culture in British society rather than accept a model from another political culture.' 28.

It is perhaps understandable that the CPGB should wish to distance itself from the mistakes and crimes of the international communist movement, but it seems strange to play down so drastically the special relationship which existed between the CPSU and the other Communist Parties. The Leninist tradition, and the relationship of the CPGB with the Soviet Union since its foundation in 1920, and also with the People's Democracies after the Second World War, was by far the most significant and dominant influence on the Party, even after the publication of 'The British Road to Socialism', as the evidence above shows. To deny this is to misunderstand the historical experience of the Communist Party.

Notes:

1. 'Daily Worker' (DW), 29 June 1948.
2. DW, 29 June 1948, late London edition.
3. DW, 2 July 1948.
4. Ibid.
5. 'World News and Views' (WN&V), 17 July 1948.
6. 'For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy' (FF), 15 April 1948.
7. 'Leninism', J.Stalin, London, 1940, page 257.
8. FF, 15 May 1948.
9. FF, 1 June 1948.
10. WN&V, 17 July 1948.
11. FF, 15 June 1948.
12. WN&V, 17 July 1948.

13. WN&V, 22 November 1952
14. 'From Trotsky to Tito', James Klugmann, London, 1951, page 31.
15. Kay Beauchamp - interview, 1 August 1989.
16. 'Tito's Plot Against Europe: The Story of the Rajk Conspiracy', Derek Kartun, London, 1949.
17. Ibid., page 25.
18. 'Defeat of Trotskyism', Marjorie Pollitt, London, 1937, page 24.
19. 'Hitler's Agents Exposed', John Mahon, London, 1943, page 3.
20. Ibid., pages 5-6.
21. Patience Edney - interview, April 1988.
22. WN&V, 13 December 1952.
23. WN&V, 20 December 1952.
24. WN&V, 3 January 1953.
25. 'All for the Cause', George Matthews, London, 1980, page 22.

26. 'Manifesto for New Times', CPGB, London, 1990, page 57.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., page 58.

Chapter Three

The Twentieth Congress of the CPSU and the Official British Response

By the 20th Congress of the CPSU in February 1956, there had been considerable change in the Soviet Union and, concurrently, in Eastern Europe. These changes had been brought about largely by the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953. Great was the mourning of this event throughout the socialist world, and of course in Communist Parties throughout the entire world. The CPGB was no exception to this, and as was to be expected, the 'Daily Worker' gave extensive coverage to the news, and the headlines were dominated by Stalin's illness and death for almost a week. The announcement that Stalin had had a stroke the previous Sunday came on Thursday 5 March 1953. Pollitt referred to Stalin's 'inspired leadership', but perhaps the most fulsome tribute at this stage came from Jacques Duclos, acting secretary-general of the French Communist Party:

'...We express the most ardent wish that the guiding genius of the workers of the world, the architect of Communism, the most sure defender of peace and of mankind, may be cured.' 1.

The 'Daily Worker' reporter in Moscow, Ralph Parker, gave a lyrical description of the mood of the people of Moscow in the hours before Stalin's death, entitled: 'In Moscow, the people's sorrow is in their eyes':

'A strange penetrating silence makes anxiety felt in the buses and shops. People speak in subdued tones. It seems as if the whole city is holding its breath.

The tender love for the man fighting to live is expressed by the girls who break down as they deliver newspapers from door to door. By the mothers who drop the book of fairy tales they are reading to children in the parks, and become lost in thought...To those who anxiously wait, Stalin personifies the immense benefits brought to ordinary people by Soviet rule.

They have lived, fought and worked in Stalin's name. They have associated him with every aspiration and with every reward.

There is an intensity of feeling in Moscow today which can find no expression in words. This day, eyes say more than voices ever can.'

2.

The editorial of Friday 6 March 1953 commented on those speculating about the political effects of Stalin's death, and has a ring of pathos about it in the light of the events in Eastern Europe in the final months of 1989:

'What these people cannot grasp is that Socialism is in Eastern Europe to stay; that the changes in Europe's political frontiers are here to stay and that there is no force in the world that can undo them.' 3.

The death of Stalin was reported in the final edition of that same day, under the headline, 'Stalin, the architect of Socialism, is

dead.'

An article by Harry Pollitt made the following points about Stalin:

'Stalin - loved as no other man in world history has ever been loved by all working people.

...Stalin - who has written golden pages in world history whose lustre time can never efface; indeed, with the advance of years their grandeur and nobility will increase.

...Eternal Glory to the Memory of Joseph Stalin!' 4.

On the day of Stalin's funeral, Ilya Ehrenburg was quoted as saying, 'Such a man cannot die; he goes into our people's future', (DW 9 March 1953), but nevertheless, change began almost immediately in the Soviet Union. There was no single leader to succeed him, but a triumvirate established, a collective leadership within which the most important figures were initially Beria, Molotov and Malenkov. Political divisions emerged however, which established a reformist wing under the leadership of Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev, against the conservatism of Molotov and Kaganovich. Unrest in Eastern Europe, particularly in East Germany and Czechoslovakia strengthened the hand of the reformers, as popular pressure sought a decrease in emphasis on heavy industry and agricultural collectivisation. The division in the Soviet leadership was mirrored to some extent in the leaderships of the Peoples' Democracies, and collective leadership began to be established, particularly in the division of top state and top party posts.

By 1955 a centrist leadership had emerged in Moscow under Khrushchev,

which moderated some of the economic reforms, but took great strides in the areas of foreign policy and domestic political reform.

Khrushchev visited Tito in Belgrade to apologise for the rift, and in principle accepted the idea that each country could develop its own road to socialism. This in itself caused great waves throughout the communist world, but much more was to follow when Khrushchev made his devastating revelations about Stalin at the Soviet party's 20th Congress.

In 1954, the Presidium of the CPSU had set up an investigatory committee to find out the extent of what had been going on during Stalin's rule. The commission, under P.N.Pospelov, one of the main CPSU ideologists, gathered the evidence which formed the basis of the Secret Speech. 5.

Khrushchev gave his own account of the giving of the Speech, and his own explanation of the events - namely, Stalin's character:

'The delegates listened in absolute silence. It was so quiet in the huge hall you could hear a fly buzzing. You must try to imagine how shocked people were by the revelations of the atrocities to which Party members - Old Bolsheviks and up-and-coming young men alike - had been subjected. This was the first that most of them had heard of the tragedy which our Party had undergone - a tragedy stemming from the sickness in Stalin's character which Lenin had warned us against in his Testament and which Stalin himself had confirmed in his confession to Mikoyan and me - 'I trust no one, not even myself'.' 6.

Khrushchev also had his own version of how the Speech, intended to be secret, actually came to be so widely available:

'We took measures to make sure that copies of it circulated to the fraternal Communist Parties so that they could familiarise themselves with it. That's how the Polish Party received a copy. At the time of the Twentieth Party Congress the Secretary of the Polish Central Committee, Comrade Bierut, died. There was great turmoil after his death, and our document fell into the hands of some Polish comrades who were hostile toward the Soviet Union. They used my speech for their own purposes and made copies of it. I was told that it was being sold for very little.' 7.

Such opportunities were not open to the leadership of the CPGB, even supposing that they would have had the inclination to take a line distinct to that of the Soviet leadership, for they were neither present for the Secret Speech, nor informed of the nature of the closed session at the Congress.

In February 1956, Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, together with R. Palme Dutt and George Matthews, visited Moscow for the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which was covered in the Communist Party press in Britain in the usual way:

'Soviet Union pushes on - to shorter hours, higher pensions, more food, better housing...' 8.

When Pollitt reported back to the CPGB on 12 March, he focussed on the constructive aspects of the Congress, such as the concept of peaceful coexistence, which had been expounded by Khrushchev, along with other statements of position on various themes:

'on peace: the present fight of the masses of people for peace is unequalled in history;

on war: war is no longer inevitable because of epoch-making changes since the time when imperialism embraced the whole world;

on transition to socialism: a firm majority can in some countries transform capitalist parliaments into instruments of popular will - but where the capitalists control huge military and police machines, serious resistance is inevitable;

on peaceful competition: socialism will win in peaceful competition with capitalism because of its decisive advantages...' 9.

The 'Daily Worker' editorial of the following day took up the point on the transition to socialism:

'The more serious press have noted the very significant passage in the Congress report that in certain capitalist countries a firm parliamentary majority could lead to Socialism by transforming parliament into an instrument of popular will.

Good. May we now hope that these papers will also take note of the programme of the Communist Party, 'The British Road to Socialism', published exactly five years ago:

'Britain will reach socialism by her own road...the people of Britain

can transform capitalist democracy into a real People's Democracy, transforming parliament, the product of Britain's historic struggle for democracy, into the democratic instrument of the will of the vast majority of her people'.' 10.

But there was more to Khrushchev's Report than details of Soviet economic development, and theoretical positions on the way forward to socialism in capitalist countries. Khrushchev also raised the question of the cult of the personality (without actual reference to Stalin himself), which he condemned as being:

'...alien to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, a cult which tends to make a particular leader a hero and miracle worker and at the same time belittles the role of the party...' 11.

Yet whilst Khrushchev had made some references to these problems in his speech to the full Congress, the real revelations were made in the so-called 'Secret Speech', to the closed session held on the night of the 24/25 February, which once it became widely known, rocked the communist world. Pollitt, Dutt and Matthews, as mentioned above, were not invited to attend this session.

Khrushchev blamed the cult of the personality of Stalin for the crimes and acts of terror that he revealed to the shocked delegates:

'A whole series of exceedingly serious and grave perversions of party principles, of party democracy, of revolutionary legality.' 12.

These offences were stated to include mass arrests and deportations of many thousands of people, widespread use of torture to solicit confessions, and execution without trial and normal investigation. Amongst details of many other abuses of power by Stalin, Khrushchev revealed that:

'...many party, Soviet and economic activists, who were branded in 1937-8 as 'enemies', were never actually enemies, spies, wreckers, etc., but were always honest Communists.' 13.

A study of materials in the NKVD archive had revealed that mass repression had been carried out against the delegates to the 17th Party Congress of the CPSU, and against members of the Central Committee elected at that Congress.

'Of the 139 members and candidates of the party's Central Committee...98 persons, i.e. 70 per cent, were arrested and shot (mostly in 1937-8)...Of 1,966 delegates with either voting or advisory rights, 1,108 persons were arrested on charges of anti-revolutionary crimes.' 14.

Although the report was then conveyed to the CPSU membership and the leaderships of the fraternal parties in the socialist countries, not all of the leaders of non-governing communist parties were directly informed. The French and Italian parties now acknowledge that their delegations at the 20th Congress (headed by Thorez and Togliatti) were given the text of Khrushchev's speech whilst they were still in

Moscow. Pollitt, Dutt and Matthews returned without this information. Dennis Ogden however, a CPGB member who worked at the Foreign Language Publishing House in Moscow, attended a workplace meeting where the text of the speech was read out. Although people were not allowed to take notes, Ogden wrote down everything he could remember as soon as he came out of the meeting. He then conveyed this information to Sam Russell, who was now the 'Daily Worker' correspondent in Moscow. Sam Russell then phoned through to the 'Daily Worker' on the international telephone lines, for foreign communist press were not subject to censorship. The 'Daily Worker' did not publish this information, as it was intended as confidential material for the leadership, but it became the basis of Pollitt's speech to the closed session at the CPGB's 24th National Congress. The full text of the speech was not made available in Britain, however, until the 10th of June 1956 when the 'Observer' carried what claimed to be Khrushchev's complete speech, apparently supplied by the US Information Service, possibly obtained from the Polish Party; this was certainly what Khrushchev thought (see above):

'Intelligence agents from every country in the world could buy it cheap on the open market.

That's how the document came to be published. But we didn't confirm it. I remember that when journalists would ask me, 'What can you tell us about this speech which has been attributed to you?' I used to say I knew nothing about it and they'd have to direct their questions to Mr. (Allen) Dulles - that is, American intelligence.' 15.

The 'New York Times' published a translation on 4 June 1956, which was never challenged. Despite the lack of official notification, there was enough said in the main Congress reports about the cult of the personality of Stalin, combined with sensationalised reports in the western press, to necessitate some statement on these controversial developments from the party leadership. Such details as those quoted above were, apparently, not yet known by the party leadership, so discussion centred around the personality cult. George Matthews, Assistant General Secretary of the CPGB, who had accompanied Harry Pollitt to the Congress, and who had also been excluded from the closed session, commented:

'In such conditions of acute threat of war or actual war, some normal practices were bound to be affected. Complete inner-Party democracy cannot function in war-time in the same way as in peace-time. In such conditions also there is always the tendency for the role of particular leading individuals to receive tremendous public attention, as personifying the national struggle for victory.' 16.

Matthews recognised the great harm caused by the cult of the individual and the lack of collective leadership, but was keen to reassure the Party that mistakes had been frankly admitted and put right, and that collective leadership had been restored:

'But the vitally important thing is that the mistakes have been recognised and put right. The fact that they have been so frankly and openly admitted is proof that the Central Committee and the members

of the CPSU are determined to see that such a situation does not arise again.

This is also guaranteed by the fact that collective leadership is now fully in operation, and, as was clear from the Congress, an exceptionally healthy situation exists within the Party, with the fullest operation of inner-Party democracy.' 17.

Credit was also given to Stalin for his achievements:

'Nor is it the case that criticisms of Stalin and of the cult of the individual mean that his great positive services to the Soviet Union and the cause of socialism, especially during the life-and-death struggles of the Second World War, should be denied.' 18.

The question of the seriousness or otherwise of the cult of the personality in Britain is an interesting one. Whilst doubtless Stalin was held in extremely high regard by party members, many felt that affording excessive adulation to leaders was unnecessary. Some considered the cult to be a Russian phenomenon, something to do with having been a backward people (both Kay Beauchamp and Noreen Branson in interviews). But clearly Stalin could command a high level of loyalty and emotional commitment. One example of this can be found in the autobiographical novel 'The Rotten Elements' by Edward Upward, who tells of how he dragged himself through a breakdown, sparked off by his break with the party over its policy changes in the late 1940s:

'He found he could stop his trembling by thinking of Stalin and by speaking the name of Stalin, repeatedly but not quite aloud, much as a religious believer might have called on the name of God.' 19.

The personality cult within the Soviet Union was certainly not a phenomena restricted to the later part of Stalin's life, for it began to take hold in a major way during the 1930s. By his fiftieth birthday on 21 December 1929, his photograph could be found inside and outside public buildings, and the press were beginning to extol his virtues. By way of celebration, millions of copies of a terracotta bust and photographs of him were distributed throughout the Soviet Union. Roy Medvedev speaks of the development in the twenties of a kind of religious, cultist attitude towards the party and the revolution.

'Party members were inculcated with the conviction that the party as a whole could not make mistakes, that the party knew everything. There could be no secrets from the party, even of the most intimate nature; everything had to be revealed to it, as to God at confession. For the sake of the party and the state a communist had to do anything; the revolution justified any cruelty.' 20.

Gradually this cult of the party was transferred to its leaders and most significantly and extremely to Stalin himself. He came to be seen as the personification of the revolution, and was identified totally with socialism and the party, to the extent that people even felt they were traitors if they went against him. This particular

characteristic is often cited in the cases of the false confessions given during the trials of the late thirties by leading revolutionaries, and is given interesting dramatic portrayal in 'Darkness at Noon', by Arthur Koestler, where the interrogators play upon the ultimate loyalty of the accused to the ideals of the revolution. In effect, that this was the last service they could perform for the party.

'When their hour came to make their last appearance before the world...none of them could unveil the truth to the world and hurl back the accusation at his judges...Some were silenced by physical fear...some hoped to save their heads; others at least to save their wives and sons...The best of them kept silent in order to do a last service to the Party, by letting themselves be sacrificed as scapegoats.' 21.

The first reference to the 'Secret Speech' was made in 'World News' of 24 March, referring to it as 'a speech made by Khrushchev to a private session', in which he spoke of the 'merits and demerits' of Stalin.

'He went on to deal in detail with mistakes by Stalin, particularly in the period after the Seventeenth Congress of the Party, in order to emphasise the vital need for observing the principle of collective leadership.' 22.

An admission was made that in the period of 'personal rule', serious mistakes and injustices occurred, not least the unpreparedness for Nazi attack. Once again it was reiterated that the Soviet Union was back on the path of democracy, both in the party and the country generally. In the same issue, a more outspoken position was published than was currently being put by the British party - that of Togliatti, General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, through extracts from his speech to the Central Committee of the PCI. Togliatti stressed the need for self-criticism to prevent the issue 'becoming the 'battle horse' of tried champions of anti-communism...'

Indeed, a compatriot of Togliatti, former communist Ignazio Silone made an eloquent anti-communist case in his article 'The Lesson of Budapest', after the November intervention, querying the honesty of western communists:

'It is you, then, dear progressive friends, who for years have preached the most absolute faith in Stalin and his dictatorship in the West. You have put at the service of Russian propaganda your prestige as writers, philosophers and dramatists. You have carried thousands of young intellectuals with you. And now all of a sudden you express surprise and disillusionment, without telling us how or why your excess of faith could have been possible. This at least is what one of your number, Vercors, had the frankness to confess: 'It is not true that we knew nothing.' So? No one has deceived you; you deceived yourselves.' 23.

Togliatti looked to communist methods to avoid this type of attack:

'To avoid this there is no other method than that which is taught in our doctrine, that is, to look at the question in an open and just manner without taking refuge from criticism and self-criticism when it is necessary.' 24.

Togliatti also criticised Stalin's theoretical contribution to Marxism. While on the one hand it could be admirably clear, it could also, under close scrutiny be revealed as 'incorrect, unacceptable and incomplete'. Togliatti also criticised Stalin's theory of the intensification of the class struggle, a doctrine which he considered led to a general and continuous distrust which resulted in events like the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party, and the violation of socialist legality allowing people to be convicted on the strength of confessions alone.

According to Stalin's thesis the class struggle would become continually aggravated; but Togliatti considered this theory to be exaggerated and false:

'From this false position can be derived in substance an almost desperate prospect of reciprocal persecution without end of one part of society by another, even within the organisation of the working class'. 25.

The extent to which Stalin's actions were the result of his going down a theoretical road which diverged from that of Marx and Lenin,

is an extremely interesting question. One could consider the attempts of Khrushchev - subsequently aped by Togliatti, Pollitt and many other communist leaders - to understand Stalin's crimes in terms of theoretical mistakes, a little disingenuous. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss Stalin as a madman and fail to analyse the political system of which he was a part and the ideology to which he contributed. Stalin was without doubt, in his own terms, a ferocious fighter in the class war, which both Lenin and Marx had advocated, but which Stalin seemed to wage against ever increasing numbers. One recent biographer of Stalin comments:

'In Stalin's vision the conception of the class enemy expanded, while that of the proletarians and their party shrank. The bourgeoisie was perceived as not only the capitalists and those dependent on them, but also a large part of the peasantry and other elements, such as the intelligentsia, that did not fit into a bipolar model of society.' 26.

Stalin was quite possibly in tune with the non-theoretical, out and out class hatred of substantial numbers of the Russian population, but he began to lose the support of other leading party members when he began to identify himself with the party and with the class, and therefore to see anyone who opposed him as a class enemy. The theory of the intensification of the class struggle clearly fits into this approach. It would no doubt be small comfort to those who suffered through Stalin's over zealous pursuit of the class war to know that he probably perceived this as the correct political path. It is of

more significance to consider whether or not this was the logical conclusion of a political theory based on conflict and control. Further study of the systems in post war Eastern Europe would no doubt contribute greatly to that debate.

Togliatti also drew attention to the negative consequences for this period on the development of theory, on the writing of history and the cultural situation.

'World News' also printed articles by other communist leaders - Matyas Rakosi of Hungary vehemently condemned the cult of the personality:

'...there are local dictators and leaders of a type that consider themselves 'infallible, like the Pope', who will not tolerate any objections and who instead of using the method of persecution use reprimands and issue orders. Such 'leaders' collect a group of sycophants and yesmen around them who accept every one of their words as gospel truth.' 27.

In the same issue, 'World News' reprinted an article that had first appeared in the Chinese 'People's Daily', based on discussions held at an enlarged meeting of the Chinese Politburo. The article emphasised the importance of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and stressed the positive achievements of the Soviet Union, including those of Stalin. But it also acknowledged that Stalin had failed to 'keep close to the masses, consult them in all matters', and so had

made serious mistakes with harmful consequences. The article identified Stalin's major mistakes:

'...carried the problem of eliminating counter-revolutionaries to excess, showed lack of necessary vigilance on the eve of the anti-fascist war, failed to pay proper attention to the further development of agriculture and the material welfare of the peasantry, advocated certain erroneous lines in the international Communist movement, especially on the question of Yugoslavia'. 28.

Stalin had acted in a manner that was subjective and one-sided, and divorced from objective circumstances and the masses. The Chinese article also introduced an interesting theoretical debate: that of the place of contradictions within socialist society. 'It is naive to assume that contradictions can no longer exist in a socialist society. To deny the existence of contradictions is to deny dialectics'. 29.

Even in a communist society, the Chinese stressed, people would still have contradictions within themselves. In the case of Stalin, it had happened that despite his great contributions to the building of socialism and the defeat of Trotskyism, his indulgence in inordinate exaltation of his own rule had led to a contradiction between his actions and the Marxist-Leninist point of view which he had himself disseminated, or rather, a contradiction between theory and practice. One party comrade, working in the foreign language publishing house in Peking in 1956 had the following to say on these events:

'The Chinese government didn't attempt any defence of Stalin. It seemed to me that they were partly pleased that it had come out, and that they were willing to be anti-Stalin. In fact they had various reasons for being rather anti-Soviet including Stalin's support for Chiang Kai-shek instead of the Chinese Communist Party right up until his complete defeat. This entered particularly into our work, because the Chinese published two long pamphlets on the situation, called 'On the Historical Experiences of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat', and 'More on the Historical Experiences of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'. We used to call them 'On and Moron'. They stated clearly that the mistakes were of a dictatorial nature, that had been very damaging both to the international communist movement and to the growth of socialism in the Soviet Union. In 1957, Mao tried to resolve the contradictions amongst the Chinese people in a non-antagonistic way by letting 'a hundred flowers bloom together and a hundred schools of thought contend'. It released an enormous amount of unpleasantness and anti-party feeling.' 30.

'More on the Historical Experience of Proletarian Dictatorship' was published as a pamphlet by the CPGB in January, 1957. This article included an appraisal of the merits and faults of Stalin; in attempting to answer the question 'How did the mistakes happen?', the Chinese leadership identified various points - that Stalin had become isolated from the masses and from the collective, and that he had violated the principle of democratic centralism of the party and the state. The main feature, however, was a personal criticism of Stalin:

'A series of victories and the eulogies he received in the latter years of his life turned his head. He deviated partly, but grossly, from the dialectical materialist way of thinking and fell into subjectivism. He began to put blind faith in personal wisdom and authority; he would not investigate and study the complicated conditions seriously or listen carefully to the opinions of his comrades and the voice of the masses. As a result, some of the policies and measures he adopted were often at variance with objective reality.' 31.

Despite the criticisms and developing critiques of Stalin and his rule by other party leaderships, however, there was no evidence that the CPGB leadership, beyond publishing these, was prepared to go further than the general position put forward by the CPSU leadership. Certainly at this point the attitude of the British Party leadership appeared to be that of keeping one's head down and trying to get on with everyday political tasks, until the storm had blown over.

The 24th National Congress of the CPGB

The Party's 24th Congress took place at Battersea Town Hall from 30th of March to the 2nd of April, 1956. In discussion of the 20th Congress of the CPSU in the open sessions of the Congress, great tribute was paid to the theoretical developments laid out by the

CPSU, as well as the enormous practical achievements in the building of socialism. Indeed, the Political Resolution went so far as to state:

'In the Soviet Union, socialism has been fully established, and the people have entered on the gradual transition to Communism.' 32.

Two party branches put forward resolutions which called for the Executive Committee to respond to developments in the movement, but virtually all other resolutions referred to mainstream political developments - largely because of the timing of the conference, which occurred only weeks after the 20th Congress of the CPSU. South West Ham branch welcomed the self-critical statements at the CPSU Congress and called on the new EC:

'...to examine our methods of work and organisation in the light of the experiences of the Soviet Party and initiate a thorough discussion throughout the Party on the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party.' 33.

West Holborn branch called for relevant changes to be made to 'The British Road to Socialism':

'Having regard to the great changes which have taken place since 1951 and are likely to take place in the next two years, Congress instructs the EC to prepare for submission to the next Congress such

amendments to the British Road to Socialism as these changes may render desirable.' 34.

It was only in the Private Session that a full discussion was held about the revelations, after Harry Pollitt's opening based on the report which had been received from Dennis Ogden in the Soviet Union. The true nature of this discussion was not revealed even in the Party press. The official statement had the following to say about the issue:

'The Private Session...also heard a report by Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary, on the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Private Session received the report and expressed full confidence in the Soviet Union, its people and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It expressed its conviction that the great perspective for the advance to Communism as outlined in the whole policy of the 20th Congress will be fully realised.' 35.

Without doubt Pollitt's speech to the Private Session was devastating for the delegates. Pollitt explained that it had been transmitted via the notes of Dennis Ogden, but that it was in essence much as had been reported in Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Introducing the item, he praised the achievements of the Soviet Union, and the rapid strides that it was taking, but went on to explain, not only about the cult of the individual but also about Lenin's Testament and his criticisms of Stalin, the 17th Congress of the CPSU, the death of Kirov, and many other aspects of Soviet

history which were either a complete revelation to the delegates, or had previously only been heard from Mensheviks, Trotskyists or the bourgeois press and had therefore been denounced.

The mass arrests of the late 1930s were referred to, as were 'confessions' of guilt made under pressure, and the arrests of many army officers. The war time experience was also overhauled - the news that Stalin had been warned of the imminence of the German attack but had disregarded the warning, and that the Central Committee never met throughout the whole war. There was also considerable criticism of the concentration of power in Stalin's hands and the needless suffering and sacrifice that many of his policies had caused, and also criticism of his theory of the intensification of the class struggle.

The account on the whole was fairly frank, and much the same as can be read in editions available of Khrushchev's speech. Pollitt's conclusions for the delegates were that there were three dangers: firstly, that comrades would underestimate the confusion and doubt that might prevail in the movement following these revelations; secondly, that they might fail to understand why these things had occurred; and thirdly, that Stalin's positive contribution would not now be appreciated.

Pollitt also announced that British support for the Cominform attacks on Yugoslavia had been based on insufficient evidence, for which the Executive Committee accepted full blame; that the statements that the party had made at the time were unreservedly withdrawn - including, with Klugmann's full support, the book 'From Trotsky to Tito' - and that every effort would be made to restore fraternal relations with

the Yugoslav comrades.

Pollitt then looked optimistically ahead to the prospects for the Soviet Union, where he considered that democracy and socialist legality were now restored, and envisaged a great intellectual renaissance and development of Marxist thought.

Pollitt concluded by noting the lessons for the British party: that debate should not be stifled, and that there should be the fullest discussion and re-examination of all aspects of party life; that there had been no cult of the personality, and that there had been regular meetings of the Executive Committee; that there was a tendency towards a narrow practical approach on leading committees, with insufficient analysis, and that more theoretical analyses of the British situation should be developed.

The discussion which followed was wide-ranging. Some comrades, in making contributions, such as William Gallacher, had difficulty in accepting what was being said about Stalin. Gallacher, for example, said that he hadn't yet succeeded in adjusting to what had been revealed. He personally had found Stalin quiet and unassuming, and to be a kindly man. Maurice Cornforth, on the other hand, stated that some of the revelations could not just be called errors and mistakes - that many of them deserved to be called crimes.

This discussion, opened in the Private Session, was to dominate internal party life for months to come. 36.

Clearly it was necessary for the Executive Committee to make some more public statement about Stalin, particularly for those members

who had not been at the Congress. It was also necessary to begin some kind of analysis of the reasons for the collapse of collective leadership, democracy and socialist legality in the Soviet Union. Harry Pollitt undertook this task in two articles in 'World News'. The issue of 'World News' on the 21 April, printed the first of the two articles by Harry Pollitt on the 20th Congress and the role of Stalin. Pollitt, repeating many of his points in the Private Session, dated the beginnings of Stalin's offences after the defeat of internal enemies at the 17th Congress in 1934, and identified the main problems as the turning away from collective leadership, the abuse of security organs, purging and pressurised 'confessions', unpreparedness for war with Nazi Germany, and the aggravation of the international situation after the war - with particular reference to Yugoslavia.

Pollitt seemed to be searching around for explanatory reasons, almost mitigating circumstances, such as the rise of fascism, the undoubted existence of some internal enemies and the hostility of other nations; these were not, he said, to excuse Stalin, but:

'...it helps to explain how it could have happened and the difficult problems involved in putting it right'. 37.

With regard to the previous monstrous accusations that the CPGB had made about Yugoslavia in line with the Cominform position, Pollitt acknowledged that Yugoslavia had remained an independent country. He made the statement that the Executive Committee of the CPGB withdrew their previous attacks on Tito and Yugoslavia, including the book by

James Klugmann, 'From Trotsky to Tito'.

Pollitt also referred to Stalin's theory of the intensification of the class struggle, that despite the victory over the capitalists and landlords by 1934, Stalin turned to the idea that consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat meant 'greater and greater dependence on the security forces instead of on the people'.

Pollitt stressed the differing view of Lenin on this matter. Lenin had emphasised the importance of remoulding and re-educating small commodity producers, whereas Stalin's line was couched more in terms of 'elimination' and 'abolition', and of strengthening the security forces. So Stalin came to rely on the security forces, instead of on the party and on the people. This made it possible, asserted Pollitt, for capitalist agents like Beria and others to worm their way into high positions, where they could use their influence to increase Stalin's distrust of others, resulting in persecution and repression of innocent comrades.

On the role of the cult of the individual, Pollitt pointed out,

'Marxism teaches us that great individuals can play a role in history only if they are at one with history, the Party and the people.' 38.

Stalin obviously did not conform to these standards, but the new collective leadership of the Soviet Union was now putting all these matters right, much, Pollitt insisted, to the chagrin of the capitalists.

It seems that although Pollitt was making certain criticisms and revelations about Stalin, he was most concerned to stress that

although communists worldwide had been profoundly shocked, they should recognise the positive achievements of the Soviet Union, and understand the circumstances under which the offences had occurred. Referring to the British Party, Pollitt stated that they had collective leadership with regular meetings of the Executive Committee, as well as wide participation and sharing of responsibilities. Introducing an element of self-criticism however, Pollitt considered that the leading committees suffered from a narrowly practical approach, and that the theoretical basis of the party's programme, in the form of 'The British Road to Socialism', should be further developed. He also stressed the need to expand party democracy, and have widespread discussion of all the implications of the new situation. Referring finally to the actual British political situation, Pollitt concluded by saying that the crucial factor at that point was the bringing down of the Tories. The second article by Harry Pollitt on the 20th Congress of the CPSU and the role of Stalin was published in 'World News' on 5 May 1956. All the following quotes are from this article. The main thrust of his previous article, that the significant issues were that the Soviet party had now faced up to the problems of Stalin and was putting things right, and that the concern of British comrades should be the defeat of the Tories, remained essentially the same. However, he also expanded some of the issues mentioned in his previous article and introduced other questions that were being asked within the movement:

a) 'How could it happen?' Here Pollitt repeated the explanations about capitalist encirclements, fascist threats and so on.

b) 'What were they doing?' That is to say, why didn't the other members of the Central Committee of the CPSU do something about the abuses going on? Pollitt pointed out that Stalin had refused to call full meetings of the Central Committee and had introduced methods of working that divided the members up and strengthened Stalin's personal control. In addition he considered that Stalin's prestige was so great that any fight against his methods would have risked fatal divisions in the Soviet Union at a critical period in its history. Pollitt was really suggesting that leading communists chose to subordinate themselves to Stalin's methods in the interests of unity and what was a generally correct line, rather than that they were afraid or rendered incapable of challenging Stalin's power. Pollitt considered that this was a correct decision on their part because it resulted in the defeat of fascism. One wonders whether this was a real belief by Pollitt in the end justifying the means, or whether he was making the best of things in an attempt to defend the behaviour of the other Soviet leaders and make out that the situation of Soviet party democracy was not actually as bad as it really had been.

c) 'Criticism and self-criticism'. Pollitt considered that the Soviet leaders were being sufficiently self-critical by frankly admitting the mistakes and taking steps to ensure that they did not occur again.

d) 'What guarantees for the future?' Pollitt considered that in the previous three years the Soviet Constitution had been enforced, law strengthened and unconstitutional aspects of the work of the security forces ended. He also stated that the whole membership of the CPSU was being drawn into discussion about the past and the decisions of the 20th Congress with the entire population of the Soviet Union. The collective leadership and its new methods of work would also 'prevent the possibility of similar happenings in the future'. He also stressed that the conditions under which the abuses had taken place, for example, isolation, no longer existed - with the rise of Communist China, the People's Democracies, and the anti-imperialist stand taken by some former colonial countries.

e) 'International solidarity'. The crux of Pollitt's argument here was that: 'there are enough hostile capitalist forces in the world attacking the USSR without our bringing grist to their mills.' He pointed out that there was no contradiction between international working-class solidarity and true patriotism. He also stressed that recent developments in socialism had been based on conditions in each country, and made five points on these themes:

1. 'We have never said that there was nothing wrong with the Soviet Union or claimed that it was a paradise.' He condemned this as a caricature of the capitalist press.

2. It was stated at the 23rd Congress of the CPGB that, 'it was wrong to try to impose Soviet discussions and lines of thought regarding scientific and cultural questions on comrades in Britain.'

3. 'In respect of this country in our judgement of the situation and the policy of our party and working class movement, we have always been a responsible and independent political party and have never hesitated to uphold and stand by our judgement when occasion arose.'

4. '...we have been right to act in solidarity with the Soviet Union against its capitalist enemies, and we shall continue to do so in the future...This does not mean that we have in the past defended mistaken policies knowing them to be mistaken, or that we will do so in the future...since we are a political party engaged in a day to day battle we cannot wait for the judgement of history on every event - we have to decide our attitude on the basis of the facts as they are known to us.'

Those who say, remarked Pollitt, that the Party's support for the Soviet Union was the main reason for its lack of strength, were wrong. He stressed that the failure to build the party was due to more complex reasons. 'We cannot make the fact that mistakes and abuses have occurred in the Soviet Union an alibi for our own weaknesses.'

5. 'Intensification of the class struggle after power is won'.

Pollitt stated that this issue was put in a one-sided way by Stalin because he did not give due attention to the fact that when socialism

is being built it has an attractive force. 'The danger lies in seeing enemies everywhere and nothing but enemies, and underestimating the possibility of winning friends and allies at home and throughout the world.'

Having dealt with these questions that referred more directly to the Soviet Union, Pollitt moved on to the lessons that had to be learnt by the CPGB. These came under three main headings:

a)'Improving our theoretical understanding': Pollitt advised that steps be taken to improve the general theoretical level of the party at all levels, and that this weakness in the party reflected a general weakness in the British labour movement regarding a preference for the immediate and pragmatic over questions of theory and principle. Three areas which Pollitt recommended for work were: the study of British labour and CP history, and British democratic traditions; British class structure; and the transition period from the then political situation to the setting up of a People's Government.

b)'Improving Party Democracy and Collective Leadership': Whilst stressing that collective leadership was indeed practised in the Executive Committee, Pollitt considered that it should be improved at all levels of committee throughout the party. Any reluctance to consider new ideas should be set aside and a realisation reached that Marxism requires all-round consideration '...and that collective discussion helps to bring out the many aspects of the problem and so helps in finding the correct solution.'

It was necessary to create an atmosphere, Pollitt said, 'where comrades have no fear when they raise points of being branded as deviators.'

c) 'The British Road to Socialism': Pollitt pointed out that the CPGB had put forward a programme for a peaceful transition to socialism as early as 1951, and had indeed been the first party outside the socialist countries to draft such a programme. But Pollitt said that there was a gap in the work of the party between the immediate programme around which it was working and relating it to the long-term programme of 'The British Road'. This hinged on concrete ways of 'developing towards the unity of the labour movement and the building up of the broad democratic alliance.'

The 24th Congress of the CPGB set the course for labour unity setting as its objective the removal of the bans and proscriptions against communists. Pollitt particularly recommended focussing on extending and developing democratic rights and liberties.

'The great political developments in Britain necessary for the advance to a People's Government mean also a great extension and flowering of democracy.'

Other aspects that Pollitt considered should be looked at were: the concept of the 'fraternal alliance' with the former colonial peoples; economic issues relating to the build-up of industry to serve a future socialist Britain; and the relations between the working class and the middle and professional classes in connection with the idea

of the broad political alliance necessary for a People's Government. Pollitt ended on a note of optimism, stressing the strength of the Soviet Union and the end of its isolation. He stressed the importance of working class unity and reiterated the fact that 'The British Road' showed that the approach of the CPGB was based on the conditions and traditions of Britain. Pollitt also stressed the importance at every stage of the class struggle of the leading role of the Communist Party, which has the duty of:

'...strengthening the ranks of the working people in every phase of their struggle against capitalism and speeding up the developments towards socialism.'

Such was the real opening to the internal debate on the crimes and misdemeanours of Stalin and the CPSU. For those who wished to see those events as a set of unfortunate circumstances which led to unnecessary problems in what was otherwise a constructive historical development, Pollitt's analysis was sufficient. For others, who felt that more fundamental questioning was merited, about democracy, about ends and means, this was the beginning of an internal battle which would leave many outside the party ranks.

Notes:

1. DW, 5 March 1953.
2. Ibid.
3. DW, 6 March 1953.
4. Ibid.
5. 'Khrushchev Remembers', London, 1971, page 311.
6. Ibid., page 316.
7. Ibid., page 317.
8. DW, 15 February 1956.
9. Ibid.
10. DW, 16 February 1956.
11. 'World News' (WN), 3 March 1956.
12. 'The Secret Speech', Khrushchev, page 19.
13. Ibid., page 33.

14. Ibid.
15. 'Khrushchev Remembers', page 317.
16. WN, 17 March 1956.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. 'The Rotten Elements', Edward Upward, London, 1979, page 194.
20. 'Let History Judge', Roy Medvedev, Nottingham, 1978, page 147.
21. 'Darkness at Noon', Arthur Koestler, London, 1964, page 201.
22. WN, 24 March 1956.
23. 'The Lesson of Budapest', in 'Emergency Exit', Ignazio Silone, London, 1969, page 131.
24. WN, 31 March 1956.
25. Ibid.
26. 'Stalin: Man and Ruler', R.H.McNeal, London, 1989, page 312.

27. WN, 14 April 1956.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Patience Edney - interview, June 1988.

31. 'More on the Historical Experience of Proletarian Dictatorship',
CPGB, London, 1957.

32. 'Resolutions and Proceedings', 24th Congress, CPGB, 1956.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. From notes of Monty Johnstone, delegate to CPGB Congress, 1956.

37. WN, 21 April 1956.

38. Ibid.

Chapter Four

Problems and Anxieties

The leadership had made its initial response to the relatively low-key revelations about Stalin made in open session at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, and Pollitt's articles in 'World News' had dealt with some of Khrushchev's revelations. Sufficient had been revealed for there to be a period of fairly widespread debate within the party press. After 21 June, when the Political Committee made a further statement, following the publishing of Khrushchev's Secret Speech in the 'Observer', the whole scope and feeling of the debate intensified.

In May 1956, the Communist Party's Executive Committee issued a statement entitled 'Lessons of the Twentieth Congress'. This statement, in common with Pollitt's two articles, failed to come to terms with the gravity of the situation, and showed a reluctance to analyse deeply the problems that had been revealed. Commenting on a good attendance at discussions within the party on the 20th Congress, it said:

'...we welcome the fully free atmosphere in which all points of view, however critical, have been put. Our party can only be strengthened by such live inner-Party discussion.

At the same time the discussions have shown that some comrades have tended to concentrate on the weaknesses revealed at the Twentieth

Congress rather than to discuss these within the context of the great advances, new perspectives and new theoretical approaches.' 1.

The statement concluded by telling the reader that socialism is the hope of humanity. Although many comrades were no doubt reassured by such statements, and the determination of the leadership to carry on business as usual, there were many who felt that the leadership was doing its best to discourage discussion. There was much anger, for example, over the way the debate was conducted in the letters page of the 'Daily Worker', because it was felt that after only a brief period the debate had been wound up following an article by the editor.

As Malcolm MacEwen, who was features editor commented:

'Letters on Stalin flooded into the 'Daily Worker', and I had the utmost difficulty...in getting them published. The Political Committee of the Party had little choice but to allow a discussion, but it saw the forthcoming Party Congress at the end of March as an excuse for bringing it to an end. On 12th March J.R.Campbell declared the discussion on Stalin closed, and replied to the Forum letters on the 15th in an article in which he expressed his satisfaction that most of the letters had not indulged in 'exaggerated denigration of Stalin'.' 2.

The debate had shortly to be opened again, not least because two days later on the 16th of March, a report of the Secret Speech was leaked in Bonn, and further details of murder and torture appeared in the

bourgeois press. The renewed debate covered a whole range of topics that are of considerable interest.

In March, letters were received from two leading party intellectuals, the economist Maurice Dobb, and the philosopher Maurice Cornforth, asking for discussion and clarity around the question of the 'intensification of class struggle under socialism'. (See Chapter Two.)

In addition, on the 27th of March, the 'Daily Worker' printed a letter from Christopher and Bridget Hill raising questions about the extent to which the British party leaders knew what had been going on in the Soviet Union. If they had known, the Hills queried, why had they not told the party members? And if they hadn't known, why hadn't they?

One can only conclude that if the leadership did not know, it was because they didn't want to. There were sufficient indications by the late 1940s to suggest that the leadership were avoiding a difficult area. There are two direct examples which indicate that the party leadership must have realised something was wrong because they actually involved members of the British party. The first was that of Rose Cohen, a party member who married a Soviet Comintern representative in the 1930s, and returned with him to the Soviet Union. During the course of the purges they both disappeared. Harry Pollitt did enquire about her whereabouts, and drew a blank. It later turned out that Rose Cohen had been sent to a labour camp, and her husband had been executed.

The second case was Doctor Edith Bone, who though not actually a journalist, had gone to Hungary with an agreement between herself and

J.R.Campbell that she would be the 'Daily Worker' correspondent in Budapest. She was arrested shortly before her intended return to Britain in 1949, and was released during the Hungarian uprising in 1956. According to Peter Fryer, who met her in Budapest:

'She was accused of espionage, kept in solitary confinement for fourteen months, handcuffed so tightly that her wrists carry a permanent mark, taken before a secret court, sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment without being told how long the sentence was, put back in solitary confinement for six months for defying the court and kept in jail for another five and a half years till the revolution set her free.' 3.

Malcolm MacEwen, who was also a member of the 'Daily Worker' staff at this time, was horrified when he heard of the treatment of Edith Bone - he had not even heard of her:

'I was profoundly shocked, for it rapidly became known, and was admitted by Campbell and Pollitt at the EC, that during Edith Bone's disappearance they had several times 'inquired' about her and had received no satisfaction whatever from the Hungarian Party...The inquiries were renewed after the rehabilitation of Rajk, but even then, when it had become obvious that Edith Bone, whether alive or dead, must have been a victim of the secret police, the British Party remained silent and did not even inform the members of the 'Daily Worker' staff that one of their colleagues had been left to languish in jail for years...' 4.

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that the party leadership had a homogeneous attitude towards the revelations of the 20th Congress. Willie Gallacher, the former Scottish MP, was unable to believe that the revelations were true - he just could not believe such things of the Soviet Union and Stalin. In stark contrast to this, however, was the position of R. Palme Dutt, who was at the centre of a storm of controversy over opinions he expressed about Stalin's excesses, in 'Notes of the Month', which he published as editor of 'Labour Monthly'.

Writing in the May issue of 'Labour Monthly', Palme Dutt asked what the great debates of the moment were. They did not, he observed, include the debate about Stalin:

'What are the essential themes of the Great Debate? Not about Stalin. That there should be spots on the sun would only startle an inveterate Mithra-worshipper. Not about the now recognised abuses of the security organs in a period of heroic ordeal and achievement of the Soviet Union. To imagine that a great revolution can develop without a million cross-currents, hardships, injustices and excesses would be a delusion fit only for ivory-tower dwellers in fairyland who have still to learn that the thorny path of human advance moves forward, not only through unexampled heroism, but also with accompanying baseness, with tears and blood.' 5.

Despite widespread objection to this attitude, and a retraction by Palme Dutt of this position in the following issue, such a view continued to find expression within the Communist Party for many

years.

The EC Resolution also initiated debates on 'The British Road to Socialism', and on Inner Party Democracy, which are dealt with in detail in subsequent chapters. In fact, the May Executive Committee meeting was of considerable significance, for not only was the resolution issued on steps to be taken in the wake of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, it was also the EC meeting which received Pollitt's resignation as General Secretary:

'A letter was read from Comrade Pollitt requesting to be released from the position of General Secretary for health reasons. The Executive Committee reluctantly acceded to Comrade Pollitt's request. It placed on record its appreciation of the tremendous service to the Party as its General Secretary since 1929, and elected him Chairman of the Party and member of the Political Committee. It also sent him its best wishes for a speedy recovery to full health.' 6.

There is no doubt that the shattering events of the previous months had taken their toll on Pollitt, physically and emotionally - as admitted in the official biography of Pollitt by John Mahon:

'The National Congress normally imposed a strain upon the General Secretary; this time it was intensified by the issues arising from the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Pollitt was far too human a person to regard the Stalin disclosures with personal detachment, they were as painful for him as for thousands of other responsible Communists, and

he was fully aware that they were giving rise to new and complex problems for the Party.

Immediately following the Congress, he showed visible signs of physical exhaustion. On April 25 he experienced a loss of ability to read following a haemorrhage behind the eyes. The medical advice was imperative - immediate rest.' 7.

John Gollan was elected unanimously by the Executive Committee to serve as Pollitt's successor. Pollitt died from cerebral thrombosis four years later, on a ship returning home to Britain from Australia.

Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union

As details of the crimes within the Soviet Union emerged, it became clear that anti-semitism, far from being outlawed - as revolutionary legislation had specified - had actually become a very serious issue once again in the Soviet Union. This was not along the lines of the pogroms of the Tsarist period, but through state policy, particularly in the years 1948-52, or the Black Years, as they were known by Soviet Jews.

The 'Jewish Clarion', the newsletter of the Communist Party's Jewish Committee, published a variety of articles and views on this subject over the year following the 20th Congress. The first mention occurred in the editorial of the issue of April/May 1956, which in referring

to the revelations of the departures from legality in the Soviet Union commented:

'Among those who suffered injustice, it is reported, were a number of leading Jewish writers who lost their lives.

These revelations come as a great shock and cause us much grief.' 8.

A fuller treatment was promised the following month, as that issue had already been delayed due to the Easter holidays and a strike in the printing industry.

The editorial of the subsequent issue spoke of the grievous effects of the Stalin period on Jewish cultural life, and for numbers of Jewish Soviet citizens, which it stressed, were alien to the communist principles of complete equality and freedom of all nationalities. The editorial also insisted, however, that these events should be seen in the context of the rise of fascism and the Cold War, with both the pre and post world war threats of capitalist aggression.

The same issue also carried what was to be an enormously controversial article - a condensed version of an article entitled 'Our Anguish and Our Solace', from 'Folkstyme', a periodical of the Central Committee of the United Polish Workers' Party, which was originally published on April the 4th. (There are a variety of different spellings of the paper's name used in the 'Jewish Clarion', used here as they appeared in the paper.)

The article referred to the cult of the personality which had enabled

the Beria clique to provoke inter-nation conflict within the Soviet Union, which had led to the growth of nationalism and anti-semitism:

'In this atmosphere, in which the Leninist principles of socialist democracy were not guarded, it was possible for the specially painful period for us Jews to arise, during which the results of the Leninist National Policy regarding the Jewish masses was destroyed.' 9.

The article described the political and economic emancipation of Soviet Jewry and its participation in all aspects of building socialism in the Soviet Union - how great Jewish cultural centres had arisen in many cities, the pride of which had been the Moscow Jewish State Theatre. It also referred to the significant and heroic role the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee had played during the Second World War, but how it had been liquidated after the war, and its leaders sentenced to death.

The Beria clique, the article reiterated, had been responsible for these actions, and had brought untold suffering to all the nationalities of the Soviet Union, and indeed, the CPSU had been the greatest sufferer of all; the policy was not therefore, the article asserted, an exclusively anti-Jewish policy. Nevertheless, it was necessary to ask why Jewish communists had been silent on this question, a silence which had often been criticised by Jewish enemies of the Soviet Union and of communism:

'Yes, truly we have been silent, in spite of the fact that we have seen and painfully felt the tragic results of the Beria clique.

We have been silent because we deeply believed that only the Party of Lenin is capable of undoing, and in the end would unravel, the tragic knot. We were convinced that the party of Lenin would ultimately reveal the whole truth, and courageously and decisively bring it out to all people. Our beliefs and convictions were fully justified.' 10.

The article then went on to talk about rehabilitation of individuals, the release of the doctors and so on. In view of the scale and nature of the offences against Soviet Jews, this appears to be a rather moderate criticism of the CPSU, particularly when set against the backdrop of the anti-semitic nature of the purges in eastern Europe of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The July issue carried a letter from Professor Hyman Levy, a distinguished mathematician and party member, who spoke out strongly against the anti-semitic tendencies which had been revealed. In answer to this position, an article was published in the September issue by Max Druck, who argued that:

'Any violation and contradiction to the theory and practice of the Communist Party that occurred must be seen against this solid background of achievement. (Illegalisation of anti-semitism etc. KJH.)...

Whatever the heart-searchings or the mistakes, Jewish Communists can take pride in the contribution that the Soviet Union has made in the past struggles against imperialism, racialism and for full freedom for all peoples.' 11.

This type of response is typical throughout the whole debate in 1956 and beyond - that terrible things had happened, but the positive achievements far out-weighed the negative - a variation on the theme that one has to break eggs to make an omlette. To some extent this highlights an underlying theme in the conflict between the party leadership and the dissenters - whether or not the end justifies the means.

In December, the 'Jewish Clarion' published a Soviet response to the Folkstimme article, drawn from an interview with L.F. Ilyichev (also spelt in more than one way and quoted as used), the Soviet Foreign Ministry Press Chief, in the New York 'National Guardian' on 3rd September. Ilyichev asserted that the article was 'slandorous and anti-Soviet':

'...the tragic fate of the Jewish writers in the latter years of the Stalin regime was not the result of an isolated anti-Semitic drive, but rather a part of an anti-intellectual campaign which brought a similar fate to many nationalities...

The true facts concern those Jewish writers who were charged and condemned unjustifiably. But the conclusions this article draws as to the persecution of the Jewish people and their culture is a slanderous one. Any objective-minded person can see that it is impossible to speak of discrimination in the USSR...' 12.

The article quoted Chief Rabbi Solomon Schliffler of Moscow expressing a similar view in an earlier interview with the 'Guardian'. The article also referred in a rather alarming fashion to the possibility

of resettling other national groups in their old homelands - groups who had been uprooted or dispersed during or after the war:

'These include the Crimean Tartars who were held guilty as a national group, of treachery committed by some of them during the war...

It is a difficult question because other peoples are now living in their old places and the question arises as to what to do with them. Some nationalities held a wrong position during the war.' 13.

The December issue also included a letter from J. Young in response to Max Druck's letter. Young did not consider that Druck had actually answered Levy's anxieties. Why should people have confidence in the guarantees of the 20th Congress that 'violations' would never again be tolerated?:

'In March of this year, the 'Manchester Guardian' reported the trial and conviction of a number of Jews for distributing Zionist literature in Moscow. Is this report true or false? The 'Daily Worker' does not know and despite considerable efforts is even unable to find out! What kind of guarantee does Max Druck find in this?' 14.

In the following issue in March 1957, the British leadership pulled in fully behind the Soviet line, with an article by William Gallacher entitled, 'There was no Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union'. What William Gallacher personally knew about the subject is an unanswered question; what is underlined, however, is the leadership habit of ensuring that controversial statements on difficult questions were

made by leading figures who were loved and respected within the Party. As such their integrity would be beyond question, and maximum support for the preferred view could be secured.

'There were', said Gallacher, 'many crimes against socialist law and socialist morality but not this most inhuman of all.'

Beria, he argued, had made use of the real danger during the Cold War - of US imperialism and espionage - to work up an entirely false danger; the national minorities were attacked, and the worst sufferers of all were the Georgians.

'But the thing they did not dare to do was to try and arouse feelings of anti-Semitism - that would immediately have exposed them...

What they did do was to accuse a group of Yiddish writers of carrying on treasonable correspondence with Yiddish writers in America. They made quite a plausible case by producing some genuine articles of the American writers along with forgeries to show that Soviet writers were supplying them with material to support their anti-Soviet campaign.' 15.

Regarding the closing down of the Yiddish Theatre, Gallacher argued that young people were not taking up Yiddish, and therefore there had been a lack of patronage for the Jewish Theatre.

The same issue also carried an 'Open Letter to Comrade Illitchow', from 'Volkstimme', outraged at the comments in the Illitchow article:

'Please give us factual proof that in 1937-8, after the 17th Congress of the CPSU (the majority of whose delegates vanished without trace),

Yiddish schools were not closed down, that Jewish social life, together with its leading and even lesser activities were not done away with. That in the years 1948-9 a general destruction did not take place of all Jewish social and cultural institutions, like the Jewish anti-fascist committee; the publishing house 'Emmes'; the periodical 'Eligkeit' and the State Jewish Theatre in Moscow.' 16.

The article also addressed the type of comment that Gallacher had made about the lack of demand for Jewish cultural functions:

'The declarations of some, that in the Soviet Union Jews themselves no longer desire social or cultural activities, are not true. It is well known that the occasional Jewish cultural functions in Soviet towns meet with a terrific welcome from thousands of Soviet Jews, that there is a great longing for the Jewish word, song, book, newspaper and theatre amongst the broad masses of Soviet Jews. All these facts entitle us to ask again: Why is Jewish cultural and social life in the Soviet Union not yet fully rehabilitated?' 17.

The same issue carried 'A Report of the delegation sent out by the Central Committee of the British Communist Party', by Hyman Levy, entitled 'British Communists make enquiries about Jews in the Soviet Union', which was also reported in 'World News' on the 12th of January, 1957. The findings included a variety of interesting points:

- a) that in the Lenin State Library's Yiddish and Hebrew sections, there was nothing in Yiddish later than 1948.
- b) that in discussion with Jews, the years 1948-52 were known as 'the

Black Years', characterised by dismissals, arrests and executions.

c) that these feelings did not emanate from the Russian people, but from official or quasi-official sources - particularly from the security police.

d) that the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee had been liquidated.

e) that many Jews were now, or still, in leading positions in the Soviet Union, and amends were being made.

Levy came to two conclusions:

- '1. that prior to the death of Stalin and certainly from the termination of the war, a deliberate policy was being pursued by a powerful element in Soviet life to exacerbate feeling between nationalities, and especially against certain smaller nationalities, and that this developed in an extreme form which led to the physical extermination of some of the best brains of Soviet life;
 2. that since the death of Stalin tremendous efforts have been and are being made to make amends for this terrible state of affairs, and to prevent it ever happening again.'
- 18.

Perhaps the most interesting question which arose from this report was that of the future of any autonomous and distinct Jewish culture within the Soviet Union. When asking Suslov, the Chair of the Central Committee of the CPSU about the reinstitution of the theatre and the Yiddish press, Levy was told that unless there was a specific demand from Soviet Jewry for those things, they would not be reinstituted. Levy took the view that this signalled a policy of complete absorption of Jewish culture:

'It seems quite clear then...that policy expects that the Jewish people in the Soviet Union will become completely absorbed and that this is being speeded up by full and complete freedom and equality; that there is no need therefore for special encouragement of Yiddish culture, and that it is undesirable to take such steps. Indeed this approach is quite consistent with the positive action they have evidently taken to bring Jews into full activity in Soviet life.'

19.

Such was Levy's official report, but he also exercised the right to make comments in a personal capacity about the implications of this policy in the same issue. In an article entitled 'Can the Jews Survive?', Levy suggested that the main factor responsible for Jewish survival throughout the ages was the periodic occurrence of anti-semitism which caused unity in distress, and halted assimilationist tendencies. So would freedom destroy Jewry, he questioned; would they be completely assimilated? Levy did not find complete assimilation a desirable end, and raised the question as to what the Soviet authorities could do to encourage Yiddish culture, and ensure that Soviet Jewry did not merge completely with non-Jews once the new freedoms in the Soviet Union were fully implemented; the Soviet authorities did not appear, however, to be interested in securing a future for an independent Jewish culture.

The findings of Levy's report, along with additional stories and reports which filtered from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, left great unanswered questions in many people's minds about anti-Semitism and the Soviet Union. Despite all the 'explanations' and

justifications for the circumstances in which these things had happened, this really was an area in which little of concrete reassurance could be said - not least because this was an issue close to the hearts of so many communists, not only because of the Jewish origin of many party members, but also because anti- Semitism was regarded deeply and sincerely as so awful a crime, the type of crime which the fascists and Nazis had perpetrated. That such had been perpetrated by communists was an almost unbearable concept, contributing to greater doubt and loss of faith amongst CPGB members.

Notes:

1. Resolution of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, 13 May 1956, in 'The Marxist Quarterly', Volume III, 1956, pages 180-1.
2. 'The Day the Party had to Stop', Malcolm MacEwen, in 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 26.
3. 'Hungarian Tragedy', Peter Fryer, London, 1986, page 57.
4. MacEwen, pages 27-8.
5. 'Labour Monthly', May, 1956.
6. Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, May 12/13, 1956.
7. 'Harry Pollitt - A Biography', John Mahon, London, 1976, pages 403-4.
8. 'Jewish Clarion', new series, no.7, April/May, 1956.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. 'Jewish Clarion', No 10, September, 1956.

12. 'Jewish Clarion', No 11, December, 1956.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. 'Jewish Clarion', No 12, March, 1957.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

Chapter Five

'The Reasoner' - a Journal of Discussion

The desire for greater freedom of debate within the party led two members to set up their own journal. In mid-July 1956, John Saville and E.P. Thompson published the first edition of 'The Reasoner', whose mast-head proclaimed Marx's statement: 'To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality.' Saville and Thompson were both professional historians from Yorkshire; Saville taught at the University of Hull, and Thompson at Leeds. From Saville's own account, they were both active party members, with Saville's membership dating back to 1934, and Thompson's to about 1940. They were also both members of the Communist Party Historians' Group which had been meeting regularly since the end of the Second World War. This group included many notable historians, many of whom already had, or went on to establish significant reputations, notably, Christopher Hill, Ronald Meek, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm, A.L. Morton, George Rude, Victor Kiernan amongst many others. Members of the Historians' Group played a significant role in the discussion at the time, and eventually came under attack by some sections of party loyalists, particularly during the phase in which the problems within the party came to be blamed on 'wobbly intellectuals'. Historian Eric Hobsbawm commented thus on the Historians' Group:

'...Why were communist historians, whether or not they subsequently left the party, so prominent among the critics of the official party attitude at the time? For there can be no doubt that they were. The Group's Full Committee (which met on 8 April 1956, a few days after the British Party's Congress had concluded without any public discussion of the Stalin issue) rebelled against the official spokesman sent to address them and passed some sharply worded critical resolutions. So far as I can recall, after this the Group itself did not express any further collective views, and was indeed increasingly split, but the fact that many of the most vocal critics came from among its members is a matter of record. The three most dramatic episodes of 'opposition' - the 'Reasoner', the publication of a letter by a number of intellectuals in the 'New Statesman' and 'Tribune', and the Minority Report on Party Democracy at the Twenty-fifth Congress of the CPGB, were all associated with communist historians (Saville, Thompson, Hilton, Hill, Hobsbawm, among others), who were therefore also publicly attacked as a body by various loyalists.' 1.

After some speculation, Hobsbawm tries to answer the question he has posed:

'(The historians) were drawn into the centre of the debate because historical analysis was at the core of Marxist politics. It may be suggested that they found themselves so largely among the critics because the - probably inevitable - reaction of the Party leadership appeared to deny this.' 2.

Hobsbawm considered it natural that Party leaders would try and play down the significance of the events, to rally the party for business as usual. The emphasis from the leadership was constantly that the Soviet comrades were recognising and dealing with their problems and there was no cause for further alarm about the Soviet Union. Indeed, as the official speaker to the History Group meeting on 8 April 1956 stated (as summarised in the minutes):

'Some jolted and may leave us, but ultimately situation will be more favourable - Soviet Union's corrections and perspective - new possibilities. Need for discussion of doubts and problems, but positively and in balanced way and historical perspective. Everything likely to settle down again in six months.' 3.

The view that the Communist Party was actually facing specific problems which had to be dealt with, was forcefully put by John Saville in a letter in 'World News' on 19 May 1956, which encompassed the following points:

- a) That following the revelations of the Twentieth Congress of excessive miscarriages of justice, the Russian leadership had suggested that the reason for these mistakes was the assumption of personal power by Stalin.
- b) That party support for the CPSU had meant that they had supported or justified wrong policies, including vigorously denying that arbitrary arrests and executions had occurred; that they had argued that on all counts socialist democracy was superior to bourgeois

democracy.

c) That when both friends and enemies would say that the party had allowed blind faith to lead them to support things which had violated socialist principles, two things could be said in response:

'Firstly, that political support of the USSR is the basic principle of working class internationalism, and this we will always adhere to. Secondly, that the error we fell into was not defending the USSR despite its mistakes but defending the mistakes themselves.' 4.

d) That the divisions were arising within the party because a majority of the leadership would not acknowledge that there was a problem that the party had to face. That the party would stand discredited before the Labour movement unless it honestly faced what went wrong and ensured that this would not happen in the future.

'Belief in our intentions and our assurances will inevitably be judged, and rightly so, by our attitude towards these recent revelations which have come out of the Soviet Union.' 5.

e) That three main problems should be subject to thorough and widespread discussion: our attitude to the Soviet Union; the political forms within which the transition to socialism would take place; the preservation and extension of inner-party democracy.

f) That the tradition of controversy and debate within the party had been on the decline and should be revived by the leadership to ensure the greatest possible discussion, out of which the development of political unity could be encouraged.

John Saville comments in his article on this period (Socialist Register, 1976), that this was the one and only article he had printed in 'World News' in 1956. A second attempt a month later was rejected on the grounds that he had already had 'one crack of the whip', and after that he didn't try any more. Saville suggests that the leadership was deliberately suppressing much of the critical correspondence that it was receiving, and that letters on this theme were treated as just one more item amongst many for discussion within the party - that of labour unity being dominant. This criticism notwithstanding, on the 30th of June, an article by Edward Thompson was published in 'World News', entitled 'Winter Wheat in Omsk'. In the rather unusual title, Thompson was attempting to draw a parallel between the misapplication of the theories of the Soviet scientist Trofim Lysenko to Soviet agriculture, and the misapplication of Soviet political theories to British politics.

Lysenko achieved prominence in Soviet scientific circles during the late 1940s - the period of Zhdanovism, described by Alexander Werth as ideological austerity combined with Russian super-chauvinism:

'...that totalitarian regimentation of thought which was one of the main characteristics of the last years of Stalin. It extended to almost every realm of human thought, science and art - starting with literature, but going on to the cinema, the theatre, philosophy, history, genetics, economics, the plastic arts, and even music. In genetics, Lysenko...was raised to the pinnacle of an infallible dictator who was able to terrorize scientists clinging to 'Mendelianism';' 6.

Lysenko denied the existence of genes and chromosomes, and was backed up in this view by Stalin, and a decree of the Central Committee to the effect that Lysenko genetics were correct and all others were wrong. Adherence to this new orthodoxy was required within the Soviet Union, and attempts to reorientate Soviet agriculture disregarding known genetic information resulted in many disastrous experiments. Lysenko's theories caused considerable controversy amongst communist scientists in Britain. Professor J.B.S. Haldane, for example, completely rejected them and moved away from the party as a result, whereas Professor J.D. Bernal, (not himself a geneticist) was more sympathetic to the ideas, although vigorously opposing the repression of Soviet scientists holding differing views.

(Opinion expressed by Margot Bernal.)

The British party, however, did not attempt to impose a particular attitude on its members.

In his article, Thompson quoted a passage from the 'Daily Worker' of the 29 May 1956 which acknowledged the mistaken nature of Lysenko's theories:

'The staff of the Agricultural Research Institute in Omsk, in support of Comrade Lysenko and ignoring the obvious facts, proved the unprovable in hothouse conditions on the institute's plots.

As a result, tens of thousands of hectares sown under winter wheat in the Omsk district alone went to waste year after year.' 7.

Lysenko had first developed his winter wheat theory in the 1920s:

'During the First Five Year Plan he had proposed to revolutionize grain agriculture by 'vernalizing' wheat, that is, moistening and chilling winter wheat seed and planting it in the spring. This simple treatment supposedly changed the nature of the plant and protected it from winter-kill. When this did poorly in practice, Lysenko claimed that he had 'vernalized' spring wheat and would produce a hardy strain of cotton that could grow in the Ukraine.' 8.

The point that Thompson was trying to make was that the party had attempted to sow Russian politics in British soil:

'...how much winter wheat (from seed matured in Omsk, Tomsk and Irkutsk) have we been ploughing into British furrows in the past thirty years?...How often have we neglected our native Socialist seed in favour of seed bred for Siberian conditions? Education classes based on the 'History of the CPSU(B)'. Russian texts on political economy...How often have we used hothouse tests to prove our theory "correct", ignoring the test of the unsheltered open field?' 9.

Thompson drew two main themes in his article, the moral climate and the democratic climate. Traditionally, he argued, many of the battles of the British people had been fought out in moral terms - those associated for example, with Cobbett, Morris, Hardie and others. The party had tended to see such moral passion against capitalism as idealistic and as a source of weakness. So it was, Thompson asserted, but it was also a source of great energy and strength for the party and for the people. The obsession that the party had developed for

the 'correct formulation' had stultified the party's language, and developed a form of 'monolithese' which reinforced the dogma and rigidity of the party.

Regarding the democratic climate, Thompson called for the party to demonstrate to the British people that it had no fear of the free clash of ideas, to allow real controversy into the midst of the party. Quoting Milton, he said:

'Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.' 10.

In defence of the existing achievements of the British people in securing some forms of democratic liberties, he further commented:

'Bourgeois democracy, we know, is a liar and a cheat. But it is a libel on our proudest history to say that all our liberties are illusions, the "fig-leaf of absolutism". It is a libel upon the British working class to suggest that they would exchange these liberties for a higher standard of life...So long as our attitudes towards these liberties are in doubt, we may win from the workers their industrial support, but not their political confidence.' 11.

A reply to this article by George Matthews was printed in the same issue, entitled 'A Caricature of Our Party', in which Matthews accused Thompson of echoing all the familiar anti-Communist sneers of the capitalist press, 'that Communists repeat dogmas like Holy Church, have little regard for morality, are un-British, not much

concerned with democracy....'

Matthews criticised Thompson for seeing controversy more as an end in itself, than as a means to an end, and for assuming that truth will automatically emerge out of the clash of opposing views:

'Certainly it is sometimes possible to arrive at truth in this way. But no 'clash between opposing views' will arrive at truth if neither view is based on fact and on a scientific approach. To arrive at truth it is necessary first to make a scientific examination of phenomena, their history and development, and their inter-relationship, to elaborate theories on this scientific basis, and to put the theories to the test of practice. This is the Marxist approach to social and political questions.' 12.

Matthews stated that controversy in the spirit of Marxism was required, which would strengthen and unite the party for the heavy tasks of the class struggle, and pointed out that the Executive Committee statement of the 13th of May had called for just such controversy to occur. Matthews also raised the idea that if Thompson was calling for controversy for its own sake, then the party could end up merely being a discussion group or dividing into a number of tiny groups achieving nothing. By raising such spectres of dissolution, Matthews would be able to win many comrades to his own side, and encourage them to disregard parts of Thompson's article which they might feel had a ring of truth. Matthews then went on to point out that the party had developed a 'British Road to Socialism' so that they did not aim to transplant Soviet institutions to

Britain, and listed a variety of educational materials and textbooks which had been produced by the party for British conditions.

In response to the question of morality, Matthews pointed out that Thompson had not actually said what he meant by morality, and went on to quote Engels as to its true meaning:

'Certainly that morality which contains the maximum durable elements is the one which, in the present, represents the overthrow of the present, represents the future: that is, the proletarian.'

...for Marxists every political decision is good or bad according to whether or not it serves the interests of the working people and the cause of socialism.' 13.

Matthews also suspected that Thompson was implying that the party's attitude towards the Soviet Union showed a lack of moral principle - that is to say that they knew wrong things were happening in the Soviet Union and deliberately refused to condemn them:

'If this is his view, he is utterly and completely mistaken. It is now obvious to all that we made serious errors in our estimate of certain aspects of the position in the Soviet Union. But these errors were not due to lack of principle, but to lack of information, or to wrong information. Comrade Thompson can legitimately argue that we should have made more effort to get accurate information; but he is not entitled to imply that our Party was unprincipled, dishonest and immoral.' 14.

Matthews went on to accuse Thompson of misrepresenting the Party's attitude towards democratic rights won over many years, and quoted the passage from the British Road which specifically mentioned the defence of these hard won achievements. As for the party posing higher living standards against democratic liberties, Matthews said that it was a libel on the party to suggest that it had ever had such an idea:

'We have always said that economic and political freedom go hand in hand, and that socialism should mean a vast extension of both for the working class.' 15.

Matthews concluded by saying that whilst being proud of the traditions and struggles of the British working class, it is not wrong to also be glad that capitalism has been overthrown in the Soviet Union, China and the Peoples Democracies, and that when capitalism is overthrown in Britain if a better job can be made of it here it will be partly due to the sacrifices and pioneering work of the peoples of those countries.

When reading the two articles, by Thompson and Matthews it is quite strikingly clear that the two are on very different wave-lengths. Whilst Matthews replies to each of Thompson's points, he does not seem to engage with them in the spirit in which they are intended. He accuses Thompson of using polemical methods and making 'fantastic' charges against the party based on very minor personal experiences. Taken at face value that is indeed true of what Thompson wrote, but Matthews uses such methods to distract from the real and valid points

that Thompson was making. Matthews also introduces that cardinal sin - weakening the party and promoting disunity, which would help to marginalise him into an anti-party element. From Thompson's point of view, it was just such a response from the leadership, which derided and caricatured his position, which encouraged him and John Saville to believe that no serious debate was going to be allowed on these subjects:

'It was the growing realisation of this fact that led Edward Thompson and I to begin to plan the publication of a discussion journal, and in mid-July there appeared the first issue of 'The Reasoner''. 16.

Some response to the two articles was published in 'World News', two weeks later on 14 July 1956. The first, broadly in support of Thompson, was from Derek Kartun, who had been responsible for the book which set out the fabricated evidence against Rajk and others, 'Tito's Plot Against Europe: the Story of the Rajk Conspiracy', published in 1949. Urging the party towards genuine discussion and rejection of dogma, Kartun suggested that the party should not use its achievements, which were well-known, as alibis for its failures, which were substantial. With regard to the need for unity within the labour movement, Kartun had the following to say:

'We shall never get it until we rid ourselves of the religious approach to politics, start speaking English, and re-examine what international solidarity really means (it doesn't mean vociferously defending the indefensible). Until, in short, we rid ourselves of the

practices we borrowed from the Russian Social Democrats, working in illegal conditions.' 17.

Kartun had, presumably, had a serious change of heart in the seven years since his book had been published. The other letter, from J. Rabstein, of Camden Rails Branch, London, disagreed with Thompson, and drew on his workplace experience in the railway yard to illustrate his disagreements; experience which he felt proved that 'nothing is more correct than the theory of our Party'. Rabstein had picked up on Matthews' suggestion that attitudes such as those of Thompson would lead to the break-up of the Party:

'At this moment, all sorts of arguments are being put forward - always in a roundabout way - starting with alleged moral considerations and lip-service to unity, and ending with unexpressed thoughts of liquidating the Party...There can be no socialism without a united Party playing the leading role...' 18.

In 'World News' of the following week, a letter from John Eaton referred to what he termed the 'Edward Thompson - George Matthews' controversy. Eaton shares the view of George Matthews that criticism should be scrupulously objective and not excessive or lop-sided, but he disagrees with Matthews' view that Thompson had gone beyond the boundaries of responsibility:

'Where George Matthews goes wrong in my view is in not recognising that the most dangerous attacks and slanders that our enemies make on

us are those based on some truth, which is then grossly inflated; such attacks are not answered by denying that there is any truth in them but by dealing with them as frankly as knowledge of all relevant circumstances permits and removing as quickly as possible the grounds for attack that are actually there. In my view Edward Thompson's article is a sincere contribution to this end from a man of highly sensitive intellectual judgement which is a great asset to your movement.' 19.

The following week, presumably in an attempt to publish a fairly balanced response to the two articles, a letter from M. Cohen in Manchester criticised Thompson for concentrating on 'mistakes' in the sphere of working class internationalism. By doing this, he suggested:

'...Comrade Thompson brings grist to the mill of the enemies of socialism in Britain.' 20.

The fear of helping the enemies of socialism by criticising the Soviet Union or the British Party itself, or other allies within the labour movement, was an extremely strong deterrent to the desire of party members to make criticisms. Such criticisms would be viewed as disloyal and as dangerously weakening to the party and movement, particularly during the Cold War period. Such a dilemma is treated at some length in Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical novel, 'The Mandarins'. When the editor of a left-wing journal, sympathetic to the Communists, is given irrefutable evidence of forced labour camps

in the Soviet Union, he is unsure whether or not to publish the revelations because of the advantage it would give to the right:

'You say that if I remain silent about the camps I'd be an accomplice...But in speaking out, I'd become an accomplice of the enemies of the Soviet Union, that is, of all those who want to keep the world as it is. It's true that these camps are a horrible thing. But you mustn't forget that horror is everywhere...So you see...my duties as an intellectual, my respect for the truth - that's all just so much idle chatter! The only question is to know whether, in denouncing the camps, you're working for mankind or against it.' 21.

Although a simplistic portrayal of the dilemma, this clearly shows the way in which many people perceived the decision that they had to make; Saville and Thompson shared the view that humanity was not to be served by sweeping problems under the carpet and declaring business as usual, but only by analysing and discussing problems could a better way forward be found. By publishing 'The Reasoner' they intended to contribute to that process. In the editorial of the first issue they declared their aims to provide a new forum for far-reaching discussion within the party, and make available translations of documents published in the Communist and Socialist press abroad, and not readily available in Britain. They also hoped that the journal would help to loosen up the constricted nature of discussion within the party, and spoke in frankly critical terms about the disincentives to creative thinking in the party:

'We believe that the self-imposed restrictions upon controversy, the 'guiding' of discussions along approved lines, the actual suppression of sharp criticism - all these have led to a gradual blurring of theoretical clarity, and to the encouragement among some Communists of attitudes akin to intellectual cynicism, when it has been easier to allow this or that false proposition to go by than to embark upon the tedious and frustrating business of engaging with bureaucratic editorial habits and general theoretical inertia.' 22.

A damning indictment. Such theoretical inertia had been broken not by the British Party itself, but by the revelations of the 20th Congress, and the change had shown two things in particular about the British Party. Firstly that some members, including leading members, were frightened of ideas. Secondly, that this had led to a crisis of theory, even to the very meaning of Marxism, as well as other serious factors:

'...the presence of grossly irrational and authoritarian attitudes intermingled with claims to a "scientific analysis": the hardening of theory into dogma, of socialist education into indoctrination: the absence of a clear common understanding, indeed at times of any common terminology, on fundamental questions of democracy, political morality and party organisation.' 23.

In spite of all these criticisms, however, the editors made it quite clear that they were taking their stand as Marxists:

'Nothing in the events of past months has shaken our conviction that the methods and outlook of historical materialism, developed by the work of Marx and Engels, provide the key to our historical advance and, therefore, to the understanding of these events themselves...'

24.

Saville and Thompson were arguing for what they considered to be the scientific methods of Marxism, to be integrated with Humanism, which they described as the finest tradition of human reason and spirit. It could be considered that Saville and Thompson were rejecting the structures and limitations of the Marxist-Leninist party, of democratic centralism, which, during the period of Stalin's rule had become repressive and undemocratic almost beyond the bounds of belief. Rather they were opting for a form of democratic Marxism which they hoped could be developed along specifically British lines. Such a rejection of one of the central tenets of the Marxist-Leninist party was completely unacceptable to the leadership; they seemed to be unable to deeply question any of the attitudes or practices of the Communist Party. The most that could be acknowledged was that the structures, whilst innately democratic had been abused (in the case of the Soviet Union), or not developed to their full potentiality (in the case of the British party). Certainly the extensive, and indeed perceptive, criticism of Saville and Thompson, which must often have cut to the quick, could not be tolerated by the leadership. The first issue of 'The Reasoner' contained a major article on Democratic Centralism, a reply to George Matthews from E.P. Thompson, various pieces of solicited correspondence, and documents reproduced

from foreign Communist publications. The article on Democratic Centralism, by K. Alexander dealt in some detail with the principles and history of Democratic Centralism. (For a fuller discussion on this question see below, 'Chapter Seven: the Commission on Inner Party Democracy'). Alexander then went on to pose various questions about democratic centralism:

- a) has democratic centralism any general disadvantages which may hold back the movement for socialism?
- b) has it any particular disadvantages in British conditions?
- c) has it any possible disadvantages in the post-revolutionary period when socialism is being built?

Alexander quoted Rosa Luxembourge, who was expressing doubts on the third point by 1918:

'Without general elections, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of speech, life in every public institution slows down, becomes a caricature of itself, and bureaucracy rises as the only deciding factor. No one can escape the workings of this law. Public life gradually dies, and a few dozen party leaders with inexhaustible energy and limitless idealism direct and rule...in the last resort cliquism develops a dictatorship, but not the dictatorship of the proletariat; the dictatorship of a handful of politicians, i.e. a dictatorship in the bourgeois sense, in the Jacobin sense...' 25.

He also went on to quote contemporary communist leaders who felt that the Khrushchev revelations begged certain questions about inner-party democracy, and therefore made reconsideration of the case against democratic centralism a necessity. One example was from Togliatti, leader of the Italian Communist Party, who was outspoken on the subject:

'Perhaps we are not wrong in asserting that it is from the party that the damaging limitations of the democratic regime originated with the gradual substitution for it of bureaucratic forms of organisation.'

26.

Even the Central Committee of the CPSU recognised that:

'stringent centralisation of leadership could not but have had an adverse effect on the development of some democratic forms.' 27.

Alexander asserted that the tendencies to dogmatism within Marxism are encouraged when political discussion takes place in a highly centralised and disciplined structure, and that occasional emphasis on inner-party democracy, criticism and self-criticism cannot sufficiently redress that balance. Furthermore, he considered that political controversy within the party had been 'barely discernible' at most times, and that 'unrelieved dullness' had encouraged many to leave the party. His criticisms of methods of discussion and election are as follows:

'Methods of discussion within the party usually result in any opposition viewpoints being dissipated rather than concentrated, and in stagnation instead of clash and dialectic producing better policies. Methods of voting do not encourage elections being used to reflect the support for differences of opinion which might exist, and thus a main means by which such differences can be crystallised and resolved by the membership is thwarted.' 28.

Aside from the problems that democratic centralism created within the party, Alexander also referred to the problems that it created for the party in its relationship with the British labour movement. He felt that a party which placed so much emphasis on authority, and which circumscribed political argument, would lack appeal to a working class 'which is amongst the most politically conscious and experienced in the capitalist world'. In addition, the prospect of uniting Marxism with the labour movement was made all the more difficult by the fact that the party had adopted what he considered to be a 'repugnant political structure', and had accorded a 'leading role', to a foreign political party. And further:

'Add to this the lessons to be learnt from those countries which have begun to build socialism with parties based on democratic centralism at the helm - the degeneration of party life, the persecution of oppositions and minorities, and the widespread constriction of democratic participation in the making of key decisions - and the case against democratic centralism becomes overwhelming.' 29.

In his last paragraph, Alexander tried to make it clear that he was not arguing against having a disciplined political party, but rather to have a discipline based on argument, democracy and conviction rather than on a centralised structure where the decisions are taken at the top, and ideas flow in one direction only. But without such changes, Alexander argued, dogma, apathy and lack of initiative could never be broken; such changes were necessary to carry socialism forward.

'The Reasoner' also published an interesting and extensive reply to George Matthews' critique of Thompson's 'Winter Wheat in Omsk' article, for which space had not been available in 'World News'. Matthews had accused Thompson of unconsciously echoing the anti-Communist jibes of the enemy press - of repeating dogmas, being un-British, having little regard for morality or democracy - but Thompson rejected this interpretation in a surprising way:

'He is quite wrong. I was consciously and openly suggesting that our party, and especially our leadership, has - from time to time - laid us open to all these very serious accusations.' 30.

Thompson's comments on 'Dogma' must have aroused particular wrath amongst the leadership:

'Holy Church...was founded upon an apostolic succession, with supreme doctrinal authority vested in the Pope and College of Cardinals. It excommunicated heretics...and sought to establish the truth or falsity of doctrines by referring to a self-consistent system of

thought...rather than by constant reference to facts.

What then are we to make of the following comments by R.P. Dutt on the...70th anniversary of the death of Marx. Dutt describes the 'succession of four figures of incomparable genius to lead mankind through the most hazardous and critical transition of human development' as without parallel in the historical record.'

Comrade Dutt next declares:

'Marxism is no textbook of ready-made formulas and recipes to be applied by fools. Marxism is a science alike in the field of theory and of action; and precisely because it is a science...it requires mastery; and mastery implies a master. For this reason living Marxism finds its expression in the 'greatest head', the 'central figure', the 'genius and perfect understanding' whose theoretical and practical leadership most effectively carries forward the fulfilment of Marxism.' (Labour Monthly, March 1953)

The passage concludes with references to Stalin.' 31.

Here, Thompson noted, was the apostolic succession and the fount of doctrinal purity, and pleaded for a fuller examination of the cult of the individual at home, and the proper scientific and rational analysis of situations, rather than being guided by faith - by trusting the views of the Soviet Union, rather than examining the evidence themselves. Such trust had resulted in the vilification of Tito and the Yugoslav Party, when the British Party had received absolutely no concrete evidence itself on which to come to such a conclusion.

The drawing of parallels between Communism and religion, and the

accusations of unreasoning faith were not new. A notable example of this was the book, 'The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism', edited by Richard Crossman MP, and published in 1950. The book was a collection of essays by either former Communists, or former Communist sympathisers who had become disillusioned and turned against communism. the contributors were Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone and Richard Wright (termed the Initiates), and Andre Gide, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender, (termed Worshippers from Afar). Richard Crossman describes the intention of the book:

'In this book, six intellectuals describe the journey into Communism, and the return. they saw it at first from a long way off - just as their predecessors 130 years ago saw the French Revolution - as a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth; and, like Wordsworth and Shelley, they dedicated their talents to working humbly for its coming. They were not discouraged by the rebuffs of the professional revolutionaries, or by the jeers of their opponents, until each discovered the gap between his own vision of God and the reality of the Communist State - and the conflict of conscience reached breaking point.' 32.

Whilst claiming that the book was not intended to swell the flood of anti-Communist propaganda, or provide an opportunity for personal apologetics, a reading of it shows otherwise. Whilst the articles in 'The Reasoner' are themselves utterly different in intention and commitment to the type of publication referred to above, it was not so difficult for dissidents such as Saville and Thompson to be

branded as dissolutionists and anti-Communists. Whilst a closer reading shows that they are clearly committed to a marxist party, albeit of a renewed and more highly democratised form, doubtless many party members would not themselves have had the opportunity to read the journal. In addition, there was a sense in which The Reasoner related to party matters on a theoretical and abstract level; for those many thousands of comrades who were active in their workplace, trade union, local organisations and so on, making very real progress and scoring small victories in the practical field, such arguments may have been interpreted as belittling or ignoring their achievements. It is clear that the party leadership made the most of this potential conflict and exploited it to isolate members striving for an increase in democracy, not least through their 'anti-intellectual' campaign which reached its crescendo at the Special National Congress in 1957.

Three letters were published in 'The Reasoner', one entitled 'What is Socialism?', by A.L., of London, which asked that question in the light of the recent riots in Poznan in Poland; a second was entitled 'An Open Letter from a Premature Anti-Stalinist', from a former party member called John McLeish who refelcted in particular on the cult of the individual, and the failure of the party to fully disavow Stalinism; the third, under the heading 'Where Do We Stand Now?', suggested that the party might have to accept some views and theories previously considered outside the bounds of Marxist philosophy - without such broadness it would be impossible to create the broad unity necessary to defeat the Tory Governemnt and build a People's Democracy in Britain.

One of the most interesting documents in the journal was the reproduction of the Editorial of the 'New York Daily Worker' of 2nd April, 1956, exposing and deploring the frame-up of the Rajk Trial in Hungary. The article criticised the hypocrisy of the reactionary press and politicians in the west who were trying to make political, cold war capital out of the admissions of guilt by the Communist governments, yet who were complicit in their own frame-ups and judicial murders, like those of the Rosenbergs, Sacco and Vanzetti and Joe Hill. Yet it went on to draw the links between such actions in the United States and such actions in supposedly socialist countries:

'...In demanding justice at home, we who have supported socialism as a system which brings real justice and freedom to all are doubly justified in condemning departures from these principles in socialist countries.

We who protest each day against the continued murder of Negroes seeking the simple right to vote have every right to demand that the investigations in Hungary and the Soviet Union shall be full and complete and shall bring to book those responsible for injustice, no matter how high their position was or is...

Any departure from the rule and practice of justice and equality, any violations of human rights, are alien to socialism. We therefore express our most profound indignation and protest against the frame-up and murder of Laszlo Rajk and his associates.' 33.

The final articles in 'The Reasoner' included an extract from the American Communist paper 'Jewish Life', of June 1956, condemning anti-Semitism and the wiping out of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union, and the reproduction of several pages from 'Nowa Kultura', the weekly of the Polish Union of Writers, of 22nd April, 1956. This last article was particularly concerned about the honest revision of the country's history, especially that of the Second World War, a full appraisal of the religious problem in the country, and the difficulties of political theories which did not relate to the concrete realities of the country.

In all, 'The Reasoner' was an extremely interesting journal; it gave in depth analysis of the burning issues of the day, and although one could find equally frank views expressed in 'World News', 'The Reasoner' did perhaps allow them more space to develop fully. However, the fact that Saville and Thompson had published outside the confines of the party press instantly made them outcasts - that was the reality of it, and they must have taken that step in full knowledge of that fact. John Saville does not himself fully acknowledge the serious nature of the offence they were committing against the party:

'One of the original sins for Communist Party members was to publish criticisms of the Party outside the Party press, and in this context journals such as Tribune or the New Statesman were no different from any other periodical. We therefore conceived our own independent journal as in no way disruptive of the Party to which we belonged, or, to be more accurate, to which we had dedicated ourselves.' 34.

Saville recognises that Communists should not publish outside the Party press, but is somewhat disingenuous in suggesting that an independent journal within the party would not be disruptive. As he well knew, there were few breaches of party rule more terrible than that of factional activity; associating for political discussion with members of other branches, unless in a properly constituted party organisation, was strictly against the rules. Publishing 'The Reasoner' amounted to publishing a factional journal, and Saville and Thompson must have known that this would lead to serious disciplinary measures, if not expulsion.

The first copy, of which only a few hundred were printed, was sold out in a few weeks, although the editors gave away a lot of free copies. Saville reports that they had received almost three hundred letters by early August, the great number of them being supportive of the initiative. Many of the correspondents reported that their letters had not been published in the party press, and above all, they were urged to continue with the journal.

Saville and Thompson were summoned by Bert Ramelson, the Yorkshire District Secretary, to appear before a specially convened sub-committee of the Yorkshire District Committee on the 10th of August. Saville was unable to attend, and sent a statement of his position at that time. They were then summoned again to the District Committee meeting on the 18th of August which discussed the report of the sub-committee. A resolution asking Saville and Thompson to cease publication of 'The Reasoner' was put to the Committee, and passed by 19 votes out of 21. There was one vote against, which was Edward Thompson, himself a District Committee member, and one abstention.

'We told the District Committee that on grounds of principle, since no guarantee of open and free discussion had been given, we could not accept the instruction. On 26th August the District Committee held a further meeting, and a long resolution was passed by 15 votes to 5 with 2 abstentions. The resolution reaffirmed in stronger terms the instruction to cease publication, and referred the matter to the national executive.' 35.

On Friday 31st August, Saville and Thompson attended a meeting of the Political Committee, at 16 King Street, London, the National Headquarters of the Communist Party, with the Party's most leading figures, including Harry Pollitt, now the Party's chairman, John Gollan, the new General Secretary, R. Palme Dutt, and J.R. Campbell. Saville and Thompson then put forward some compromise proposals which were summarised in 'World News' on the 22nd September. The main points were as follows:

- a) That they were two longstanding, active members taking a stand on a question of principle.
- b) That they believed there was a crisis in the party not being reflected in the party press or in leadership statements.
- c) That the party press had been reluctant to publish fully and freely the doubts of many members.
- d) That whilst in a disciplined party the majority view must prevail, nevertheless, ideas must be allowed to develop, and minority views must be allowed to be sustained and developed.
- e) That there should be a journal of free discussion free from direct

intervention by the Executive Committee.

f) That they were not engaged in factional activity because that involved a difference in policy and approach.

g) That a compromise solution would be possible on the basis of:

(i) after the publication of the second edition of 'The Reasoner', it should be suspended until the Congress where a vote could be taken on the rules governing such activities.

(ii) that in November, instead of the third edition of 'The Reasoner', a journal be published debating the issue of the right to publish, edited by Saville, Thompson, and two members appointed by either the Executive Committee or the Yorkshire District Committee. The Executive Committee should, in addition, actively encourage its circulation and discussion in the party. Ex-party members who had not participated in anti-party activity should also be allowed to contribute to the journal.

h) That if disciplinary action against them were contemplated, the Executive Committee should consider the consequences of such an action on other party members and on the wider labour movement.

The response of the Political Committee was clear:

'Comrades Thompson and Saville...had been guilty of a grave breach of Party rule, practice and discipline, and that whatever their motives, the results of their actions were doing grave harm to the Party.' 36.

Saville himself reported the meeting in the following way:

'The Political Committee members made a wholly constitutional reply to our points; and the publication of 'The Reasoner' was considered entirely within the context of Party rules and regulations, the meaning of democratic centralism, and so on. It was a complete failure of minds to meet; on our side we wanted to discuss politics, what the crisis was about and why we needed a much more serious analysis of the 20th Congress; while the PC talked only within the narrow framework of Party organisation and the ways in which we had violated its rules.' 37.

As longstanding and experienced party members, Saville and Thompson could hardly have expected any different. The points in question - of publishing an unofficial journal within the party, and making demands about changes of rule - were, from the point of view of the Political Committee, completely non-negotiable. Saville and Thompson had, after all, merely set themselves up as editors of the journal. They were not elected by any party organisation to that post, and were not democratically accountable to any body. In short they were operating completely outside the party structures, and left the Political Committee with no choice other than to take disciplinary action against them. The kind of response that Saville and Thompson were wanting was not one that the party apparatus or leadership at this time was capable of taking. It was not possible for an exception to be made for 'The Reasoner', and the Executive Committee statement on the question did attempt to explain why:

'...if they claimed the right to publish their own political journal, they could not deny that right to others. Any individuals, or groups of individuals, disagreeing with any aspect of the democratically decided policy of the Party at any time, would be entitled to produce their own political journals and circulate them.

Far from being democratic, this situation would be the negation of democracy. For such journals would be completely beyond the control of the Party membership, and would be produced by individuals not elected by or responsible to the membership, but who had the necessary time and money to produce the journals and distribute them...

...the question of factionalism was not as presented by Comrades Thompson and Saville. The essence of factionalism is the taking of steps which cut across the democratic organisation of the Party. Once steps are taken which ignore or by-pass the Party branches and the elected committees of the Party, then whatever the motives of those taking such steps, inevitably a separate organisation begins to be built up, and tendencies are set in motion which in the end can lead to different leaderships, different centres, and different policies appearing in the party.' 38.

The Executive Committee statement went on to say that it had established commissions to discuss inner-party democracy and 'The British Road to Socialism', and that Saville and Thompson had not put their views to the Commissions, as they had the right to do.

Furthermore, that discussions had been initiated in the party press about these two areas, and on the question of working class unity,

but that no contribution had been received on these questions from Saville or Thompson. They stated that the Executive Committee was desirous of stimulating the most thorough-going discussion on party policy and organisation which every party member had the duty to contribute to. Saville and Thompson were in practice, refusing to contribute to the discussion, and it was they, the EC asserted, who were behaving in a completely undemocratic way, not the Committee itself. If Saville and Thompson disagreed with democratic centralism, then they had every right to work within the party for a change of rules at the Congress, but they had no right to expect the rules to be suspended for their individual benefit in the meantime.

The Executive Committee then instructed Saville and Thompson to cease publication of 'The Reasoner'. 39.

However, in the period between the Political Committee meeting, and the Executive Committee meeting which had confirmed the instruction to cease publication, Saville and Thompson had prepared the second edition of the journal and published it twenty-four hours before the EC meeting. From their point of view their timing was perfect - no additional action could be taken against them for the second issue because it had come before the official instruction. That instruction now applied to publishing a third edition, for it was clear that if they now went against the EC's ruling, they would be suspended or expelled.

The second issue of 'The Reasoner' contained a variety of contributions, many appreciative of the initiative, some critical of aspects of the first edition; a long letter from J. Lyons of London argued against many of the points that had been made in the previous

article on democratic centralism. In some respects the journal seemed to have become somewhat orientated towards talking about itself and its role, rather than the more indepth treatment of larger theoretical issues, but one important issue did emerge from its pages - the posing of 'intellectuals' as a problem within the party. An interesting contribution on this theme came in a letter from Doris Lessing:

'One of the most interesting and frightening of the reactions to the 'revelations' is the attitude of mind expressed by the phrase 'you intellectuals'. It is a phrase which inevitably emerges during the course of a conversation with any of the comrades in leading positions; and it is only yet another of the defensive rationalisations against clear thought...

We all know that the British working class movement has an instinctive anti-intellectual bias, which we need not go into here. We all know that intellectuals in our kind of society tend to be isolated from the ordinary people...Above all, the Stalin era was deeply anti-intellectual in the sense that it suppressed the emergence of ideas that were not of immediate service to the business of survival.

But I do not think that the way to break down this barrier is to separate ourselves off, as intellectuals, from the conflicts inside the party now. I think it would be a pity if 'The Reasoner' became a sort of sniping post from the tree of liberty at the body of the party.' 40.

Lessing went on to urge the editors to do all they could to prevent 'The Reasoner' becoming a revolt of the intellectuals, and to argue that scape-goating on either side was a bad characteristic - it was not enough just to get rid of the old leadership and get in a new one - that, Lessing considered was only part, on another level, of the process that had led to the trials, frame-ups and murders in the Communist countries. She also expressed a view about the reason for such silence on these issues in the past:

'...up to the 20th Congress, if those of us who knew what was going on - and it was perfectly possible to know, if one kept one's mind open and read the plentiful evidence available - if we had said what we thought, in the only place open to us, the capitalist press, we would have been cast out by the party and branded as traitors...That is why we kept silence. We believed that Communism had a vitality and a moral vigour that would triumph over the brutality and intellectual dishonesty which had undermined it. We were right to think so. But we did keep silence, knowing exactly what we were doing...' 41.

Another letter, from Lawrence Daly, a leading member from West Fife who was eventually to become General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, also commented on the question of the 'intellectuals'. He argued that misgivings about the party leadership's attitude were not confined to 'intellectuals', although an attempt had been made to give that impression. He commented at some length about that attitudes of British workers to the Communist Party and its stance on democratic rights:

'I am no 'intellectual', having been a coal-miner all my life...Others in this area who agree with me, including coal-miners, cobblers, and housewives, are as deeply concerned as any 'intellectual' with the political and moral issues arising from the Krushev speech...Such comrades realise that, whether we like it or not, the mass of the workers are concerned about the issues which were spotlighted at the 20th Congress, and, indeed, were concerned about them years before that Congress took place. However inadequate and hypocritical British capitalist democracy may be, the average worker does feel that he has the right, more or less, to express his own opinion freely on political and other affairs, worship freely in his own way, get a fair trial if he is arrested, listen to different points of view and make up his own mind, travel almost where he likes (if he can afford it) and so on.

Workers cherish these rights, however restricted, and have refused to give any substantial political support to the C.P. largely because they feared that many of these rights would disappear if it came to power.' 42.

Rodney Hilton also touched on the subject in a contribution entitled 'Labour-Communist Relations'. Expressing anxiety that 'The Reasoner' seemed to be mainly supported by intellectuals, Hilton thought this not surprising in view of the fact that intellectuals had done much work as publicists for the various phases of Soviet and British Communist policy. The most important thing he considered, however, was the question of the relationship between Communists and non-Communists in the labour movement:

'...Labour men and women who should be our closest allies and friends have become convinced that we are incapable of independent thought. They have concluded, with some justification, that British Communist policy, even if made in Britain, was done under Moscow patent. The point now is to prove that this is no longer the case.' 43.

By the beginning of October, Saville and Thompson had decided that they would publish the third issue of 'The Reasoner', and at the same time announce that they were ceasing further publication in what they saw as the best interests of the party. Following the disciplinary action that would undoubtedly ensue, they intended to appeal to keep the political issues alive. However, another cataclysmic train of events began during this period which influenced events within the party quite significantly, namely, the start of the uprising in Hungary. Saville recalled that Suez had hardly cropped up in his correspondence of the time, because total opposition to it was understood. Hungary, following hard on the heels of the summer disturbances in Poland, was another matter:

'Before the night in October when fighting began, it was already evident that widespread discontent was showing itself among the Hungarian people. 200,000 had attended the reburial of Laszlo Rajk at a time when the London 'Daily Worker' was calling for 'no vengeance' against Stalinists who had been guilty of what had become the standard phrase for massive injustices, torturings and killings: 'violations of socialist legality'.' 44.

The last minute editorial for the third issue was agreed on the phone between Saville and Thompson on Sunday 4th November. The Russian attack on Budapest had occurred in the early hours of that day. The editorial took the following position:

'The intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary must be condemned by all Communists. the working people and students of Budapest were demonstrating against an oppressive regime which gave them no adequate democratic channels for expressing the popular will. The fact that former fascists and those working for the restoration of Capitalism joined the revolutionaries does not alter this central issue...

In this crisis, when the Hungarian people needed our solidarity, the British Communist Party has failed them. We cannot wait until the 21st Congress of the CPSU when no doubt the attack on Budapest will be registered as another 'mistake'. The International Communist movement...must exert its full moral influence to effect the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary...' 45.

The editorial went on to urge all readers to dissociate themselves from the position of the Party leadership, which was complete support for the Soviet intervention. The Executive Committee statement asserted that the forces of counter-revolution had been on the point of seizing power in Hungary, as signalled by the broadcast of Cardinal Mindszenty, who had called for the restoration of capitalism and landlordism. The statement also referred to the Nagy government as being openly hostile to the Soviet Union and making concessions to

the reactionary forces, and welcomed its overthrow and replacement by that of Janos Kadar. The intervention by Soviet troops was described thus:

'The Soviet Union, in responding to the appeal made to them to help defend socialism in Hungary, is also helping to defend peace and the interests of the world working class.' 46.

Following the publication of the third issue of 'The Reasoner', and also for their position on Hungary, Saville and Thompson were suspended from membership of the party for three months. The Executive Committee statement in 'World News' of 17 November pointed out that not only had Saville and Thompson ignored the EC instruction not to publish again, but they were also encouraging the members to dissociate themselves from the party leadership, and implying that another organisation might be set up. The EC pointed out that the editors had rather changed their approach throughout the life of the journal:

'In the first number they emphasised that 'The Reasoner' was purely a discussion journal. But the last number is utilised for a full-scale attack on the current policy of the party and a call to others to join in an organised effort to prevent that policy from being operated.' 47.

This was, of course, true, but it appears to have been the events in Hungary which made them take a more extreme course than they had

earlier intended to do. Following their suspension, they both resigned from the party, which was, according to Saville's account, not what they had intended to do before the Hungarian uprising. As he commented to a correspondent at the time:

'Had not Hungary occurred I was prepared to stay in and continue the fight so long as the ban on discussion was not complete - not so much because of any real effect upon the leadership that might result but only to help further the processes of new thinking that despite its limitations The Reasoner has undoubtedly encouraged. Now, however, it seems to me that the Party is hopelessly discredited and compromised and I see no future for it except as a militant industrial force on the factory floor.' 48.

The resignations of Thompson and Saville were noted by the Executive Committee under 'Matters Arising':

'It was reported that since the last Executive Committee meeting the resignations of John Saville and Edward Thompson had been received.' 49.

Of the nine thousand or so members who left the party around 1956, one wonders to what extent either the Secret Speech or Hungary were the greater blow, or whether it was really the combination of the two that proved completely insufferable. Regarding the composition of those resigning - whether workers or intellectuals - Saville makes the following point:

'The belief that most of these 7,000 were intellectuals is untrue, although several hundred intellectuals did certainly resign. But from the evidence that we gathered at the time, there were a large number of resignations from industrial workers, including trade union officials.' 50.

It would seem to be the case that the leadership used the label of 'intellectual' in a derogatory way to discredit opposition. But in the leadership's fight against opposition within the party, and particularly against 'The Reasoner', they showed very little imagination. Although there was quite a broad debate conducted in the party press, with very considerable criticism printed, it was clearly not enough for many party members. The plea of Saville and Thompson for the publication of a special discussion supplement, or additional journal, allowing for the publication of more submitted materials, was actually taken up, and three issues of a special supplement to 'World News' were published between January 1957 and the 25th Congress in April 1957. This was, however, an initiative strictly under the control of the party leadership. In further recognition of the need for greater theoretical debate within the party, the Executive Committee planned to initiate a theoretical and discussion journal for the Party, the decision being taken at that same Special Congress to launch 'Marxism Today' for that purpose. They clearly recognised the urgency of this move:

'Following the Congress the new Executive Committee would then decide upon the arrangements for the new theoretical journal including the

date of publication, and editor and editorial board, etc.

It was agreed to ask the P.C. to ensure that preparatory arrangements were made so that discussions could be rapidly reported after Congress without a long gap before the first number appeared.' 51.

By that time, however, Saville and Thompson were already outside the party and publishing the 'New Reasoner', which was to merge three years later with 'Universities and Left Review', to form the 'New Left Review'.

Notes:

1. 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', Eric Hobsbawm, in 'Rebels and their Causes: Essays in honour of A.L.Morton', London, 1978, page 40.
2. Ibid., page 41.
3. Ibid., page 47.
4. WN, 19 May 1956.
5. Ibid.
6. 'Russia: the post-war years', Alexander Werth, London, 1971, page 201.
7. DW, 29 May 1956.
8. McNeal, pages 276-7.
9. WN, 30 June 1956.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. 'Socialist Register, 1976', John Saville, page 6.
17. WN, 14 July 1956.
18. Ibid.
19. WN, 21 July 1956.
20. WN, 28 July 1956.
21. 'The Mandarins', Simone de Beauvoir, London, 1957, pages 443-4.
22. 'The Reasoner' (TR), John Saville and E.P.Thompson (eds), July 1956, page 2.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., page 8.
26. Ibid., page 9.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., page 10.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., page 12.
32. 'The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism', ed. Richard Crossman MP, London, pages 8-9.
33. TR, July 1956, page 22.
34. 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 7.
35. Ibid., page 10.
36. WN, 22 September 1956.
37. 'Socialist Register, 1976', pages 10-11.

- 38. WN, 22 September 1956.
- 39. Executive Committee Minutes, 8th/9th September 1956.
- 40. TR, 2nd issue, September 1956, page 12.
- 41. Ibid.
- 42. Ibid., page 27.
- 43. Ibid.
- 44. 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 13.
- 45. TR, 3rd issue, November 1956.
- 46. WN, 10 November 1956.
- 47. WN, 17 November 1956.
- 48. 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 15.
- 49. Executive Committee Minutes, 15th/16th December 1956.
- 50. 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 16.
- 51. Executive Committee Minutes, 15th/16th December 1956.

Chapter Six

'The British Road to Socialism'

The Executive Committee Resolution of the 13th of May 1956 also announced the intention of the EC to:

'initiate a Party discussion...with the aim of preparing a new edition of the British Road to Socialism for presentation to the Party branches and to the next Party Congress'. 1.

The Resolution noted that the CPGB had been the first Communist Party outside the socialist countries to put forward a programme for peaceful transition to socialism, through establishing a broad popular alliance, electing a People's Government, and transforming Parliament and the state. But the EC also considered that the party's analysis had not been carried far enough; it was also necessary to study:

'...how the democratic liberties won in generations of people's struggle can be maintained and extended in the transition to socialism, to consider the problems of Party political life and the relations of other political parties under a People's Government, and to examine the methods of guaranteeing socialist legality.' 2.

The need for more work on the question of peaceful co-existence was also highlighted, as was the issue of future relations between liberated colonial countries and a 'People's Britain', and the future of local government.

Some small changes were eventually made to 'The British Road', but the really major transformation of policy had already taken place in the preceding decade.

The first party programme 'For Soviet Britain', had been adopted at the 13th Congress in 1935. Prior to that the most comprehensive document that had been issued was 'A General Election Manifesto, Class Against Class', in 1929, which pursued the following position:

'The Communist Party is the Party of the working class, in fundamental opposition to all other parties.'

'Class Against Class' demanded not only a fight against the Tories and Liberals, both termed parties of imperialism, but also against the Labour Party, described as the third capitalist party. Workers were urged not to vote Labour, but to raise the call for a 'Revolutionary Workers Government'.

'For Soviet Britain', however, was a detailed and devastating critique of capitalism in Britain, combined was an in-depth and serious attempt to set out and develop a concrete programme for socialist change in all major industries. Nevertheless, some of the attitudes of 'For Soviet Britain', are very much still a part of the earlier approach of the class against class period. For example:

a) The working class alone is seen as the force capable of carrying through the socialist revolution. Whilst technical and professional workers and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie will have a place under workers' power, they do not have any role in the struggle to establish it.

b) Working class unity is sought with the rank-and-file, but there is no suggestion that the Labour Party as an organisation has any role to play in winning and exercising working class power, indeed:

'...power will be in the hands of the working class, led by its most class-conscious section, organised in the Communist Party.' 3.

c) The Parliamentary system does not have a role in the exercise of working class power - it will be replaced by workers' councils (ie soviets). Neither is Parliament seen as having any positive role in the period of struggle before the revolution - it is seen solely as a tool of the bourgeois state:

'What kind of government will the British workers establish when Capitalism has been overthrown? They will not maintain the present parliamentary system.

Does this mean that workers will abolish democracy? It does not; for the parliamentary system has not brought any real democracy to the overwhelming majority of the British people. What the parliamentary system really is, as any worker may learn from his own experiences, is a form of political organisation which the capitalist class of Britain has worked out to serve its own needs.' 4.

The question of transforming the institution was considered out of the question:

'It is quite impossible for the workers to take over this machine and use it for their own entirely different purposes. The workers will have an altogether different job in hand, and they will have to fashion different tools for the doing of it.' 5.

d) 'For Soviet Britain' also sees no alternative to violence and civil war - because the ruling class will leave the workers with no alternative.

'The leaders of the Labour Party declare that the workers must choose between a peaceful gradual way of abolishing capitalism and establishing socialism and the revolutionary way advocated by the Communists. But the workers have no such choice...It is nothing less than a crime to delude the workers with the false hope that the capitalists will quietly lay down their powers and privileges if only sufficient Labour members of Parliament are elected.' 6.

'For Soviet Britain' clearly draws its approach and inspiration from the works of Lenin, and the undisputed international Communist position of the time. Party policy was based on Lenin's 'State and Revolution':

'...it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution, but also without

the destruction of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class...' 7.

Such an attitude is also reflected by the attitude of the Soviet Party in 'History of the CPSU(B), in the chapter on 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism':

'...the transition from capitalism to socialism and the liberation of the working class from the yoke of capitalism cannot be effected by slow changes, by reforms, but only by a qualitative change of the capitalist system, by revolution.

Hence, in order not to err in policy, one must be a revolutionary, not a reformist.' 8.

However, by 1952, and the adoption and endorsement of the first edition of 'The British Road to Socialism' by the National Congress in the April of that year, fundamental attitudes to the revolutionary process had radically changed, to the extent that even parliament could be transformed:

'...British Communists declare that the people of Britain can transform capitalist democracy into a real People's Democracy, transforming Parliament, the product of Britain's historic struggle for democracy, into the democratic instrument of the will of the vast majority of her people.' 9.

What had enabled this transformation to take place? Of key importance were the developments of the war years. In May 1944 the Executive Committee published a discussion document called 'Britain for the People - Proposals for post-war policy'. Particularly significant in the change of attitude were the gains of the war in terms of economic planning, and worker participation in management through Joint Production Committees.

'Vast new State enterprises worth many hundreds of millions of pounds have been built during the war. There are State factories to the value of £381 million, and State assets in the hands of private firms valued at £293 million. There are great quantities of State-owned agricultural and industrial equipment. These must not be wasted or handed over to private ownership as after the last war.' 10.

'...as a result of the war, new forms of participation in the management of their common activities have been won by the people in industry, in local life, in civil defence, and even, in certain directions, in the armed forces.

Joint production committees in thousands of enterprises, reception committees, savings committees, firewatching parties, the shelter committees and in different ways, collective life in the Home Guard and the services have brought to millions of men and women a new sense of social responsibilities and a power of initiative.

...In the long run the people's will prevails only through their own action. This is the meaning of democracy.' 11.

Clearly the view was developing that wartime planning and participation could provide the basis for socialism - that this could be built upon after the war. The notion of smashing the state machine had been dropped. Such a major transformation of policy did not go unchallenged, however, as emerged during the pre-Congress discussion period before the 19th National Congress from February 22nd to 24th, 1947. The support that the Communist Party had given to the Labour Party, both in words and deeds, particularly in ensuring increased production in the coalfields, led to accusations by some members of 'right opportunism'. A letter entitled 'Abandoning Marxism?' by Eric Heffer, later a Labour MP, who was a Communist party member at this time, illustrates this point in his criticism of the EC resolution prepared for the Congress, which failed to show:

'...the strengthened position of monopoly within Britain, and their fusions with the state apparatus..

The EC resolution glosses over vital theoretical problems. the policy presented as a result of this failure can only be described as Left Social-Democratic, i.e. opportunist...

By the EC forgetting the dictatorship of the proletariat, and inferring that now a peaceful transition to Socialism is possible, it means that they have virtually abandoned Marxism, or only make use of those parts and quotations etc, which are acceptable to the petty bourgeoisie.

...We must never forget that Social Democracy is not the opposite of fascism, but its twin...' 12.

At the 19th Congress itself, Harry Pollitt replied to such criticisms, which also came from the floor of Congress, by quoting Georgi Dimitrov at the closing of the 7th World Congress of the Comintern in 1935:

"We have deliberately excluded fine-sounding phrases about the revolutionary perspective, both from the reports and the decisions of Congress....we wish to free our Parties from every tendency to replace Bolshevist activity by revolutionary phrases, or fruitless disputes about the estimation of the revolutionary perspective.'" 13.

The Political Resolution from that Congress reiterated the Communist Party's support for Labour against Toryism and the monopolists, whilst fighting for basic changes in the policy of the Labour Government. The notion of a 'social-democratic middle way' between capitalism and communism was explicitly rejected.

In the summer following the Congress, the Party published a booklet entitled, 'Looking Ahead', by Harry Pollitt, on 23 August 1947. This outlined the Party's analysis, and clearly showed that the leadership considered the Labour Government to be a progressive force:

'I have no hesitation in declaring that the essence of the period we are now in is that of a transition stage towards Socialism'. 14.

In many respects, 'Looking Ahead' was a reflection of the hopes that the Party had held for the Labour Government in 1945 to 46, and had emerged rather late in the day. By 1947 the war-time alliance

euphoria was over; the cold war had begun, US pressure was increasing against the Communist Parties of France and Italy, the Labour Government was helping to destroy the hopes for Communism in Greece, the witch-hunts in the United States were beginning. In September 1947, the Cominform was founded, and Andrei Zhdanov made a statement that the world was split into two great hostile camps. In December 1947, Harry Pollitt gave a Report to the Executive Committee which contained a reassessment of the British and world situation, and a reassessment of party policy:

'When the world is clearly divided into an imperialist and an anti-imperialist camp, with a Labour Government an active partner in the imperialist camp, and carrying through a capitalist solution of the crisis, it is necessary that important changes in the policy of the Communist Party to meet this situation should be made.' 15.

Pollitt recognised weaknesses in analysing the following:

- a) the strength of US imperialism
- b) the drift to the right of the Labour Government and its role in the Marshall Plan and as an instrument of the imperialist camp
- c) not fighting enough for wages and conditions in the campaign for increased production, and placing themselves... 'in a position where we seem to be holding back the struggle for workers' demands'.
- d) in being insufficiently critical of social democracy:

'Our campaign of exposure of the role of social democracy has also been insufficient... We have not explained nearly enough how for

social democracy, social reforms are an end in themselves and not the means to advance to greater aims; that at every decisive moment in the class struggle, the power of social democracy is thrown on the side of the capitalists and not the working class.'

e) regarding party organisation:

'Furthermore, in our anxiety to improve our organisation for fighting elections, we did so in many cases at the expense of factory organisation, and are not yet giving sufficient attention to developing our mass work and organisation in the factories'. 16.

A violent attack was launched on the British Party by the Australian Communist Party, in a letter received in April of 1948 and published in 'World News and Views' in August 1948.

'The false estimation of the role of Social Democracy and of the economic and political condition of Britain reached its climax in the Central Committee's pronouncement that Britain was 'in transition to Socialism'...The class collaborationist outlook in regard to the economic problems of Britain can be found, ad nauseam, in the statements of all leading comrades...The so-called new policy aims merely at yet another Social Democratic government, covered up with phrases about being based on the left forces in the Labour Movement...It is mistaken; in its essence it is Browderism applied to British conditions.' 17.

At the 20th Congress of the Party in 1948, the policy of critical support for the Labour Government was replaced by the statement that the Labour Movement should fight for a new Labour Government of the left which would carry through a real socialist policy. At the General Election of 1950, the party fielded an unprecedentedly large number of candidates - one hundred, and won nothing. Not only did it make no gains, it also lost the two seats held since 1945 by Gallacher and Piratin in Fife and Stepney. This disastrous result was analysed at the Executive Committee meeting of July 1950. Referring to the results, Pollitt had the following comments to make:

'The results for our Party exposed our isolation from the masses...There is evidently a gap between what the workers are thinking and wanting, and what we believe they are thinking and wanting.

Our fundamental mistake was that we saw only our candidates...We in fact accepted a position of self-imposed isolation which made it appear that we looked upon all workers in the labour movement as one reactionary mass'. 18.

Most interestingly perhaps, Pollitt asserted the Britishness of the Communist Party, and expressed a clear desire to distance the party in the eyes of the people, from the Soviet Union:

'We have allowed our Tory and reactionary Labour enemies to create the impression that we are not a British Party, but one that is largely interested in defending the Soviet Union and Peoples

Democracies. We have been placed on the defensive in this matter by both the open class enemy and by the right wing Labour leaders. We have not indignantly and vigorously proved, as we can, that we are a British political Party, born out of the conditions in Britain, fighting for a successful solution of every problem in the interests of the British working class and all democratic and progressive people. We naturally will defend under all circumstances the interests of the workers of the Socialist nations of the world, but we best do this, not by being their apologists, but by the way we fight for our policy, and the extent to which we win mass support for it.' 19.

From this Executive Committee, the first 'British Road to Socialism' was drawn up, the main planks of which were:

- a) that socialist revolutionary change can be brought about by a broad coalition or popular alliance of all sections of the working people which would include professional people and all lower and middle sections in the towns and of farmers in the countryside
- b) that right wing labour ideas and policies can be defeated through struggle, and a basis laid for Labour-Communist unity
- c) that Parliament can be transformed into the democratic instrument of the vast majority of the people, and that Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary struggle will be able to carry through the great changes required in the state apparatus and the economy.

By 1956, therefore, the British Communist Party had a programme which had been specifically designed for the political conditions in

Britain, yet which must surely have given the party some crisis of identity. If it had rejected the Leninist model, rejected 'State and Revolution', despite the fact that all parties were positively encouraged to develop their own 'roads to socialism', was it still a revolutionary party, or was it now reformist? Its relationship with the left of the Labour Party was ambiguous; in which ways was the Communist Party significantly different from the Labour left? The dilemma of whether or not to support Labour at elections, or whether to stand Communist candidates instead never seemed to be satisfactorily resolved. Such factors can only have led to greater confusion after the 20th Congress of the CPSU, when confidence in the Soviet Union, one of the main reasons presumably for having a Communist Party, was seriously undermined.

These claims by the Communist Party to be a specifically British Party with a British political programme have been recently put to the test by the revelations of George Matthews in an issue of 'Changes', the newspaper of the former Communist Party (dissolved in November 1991). In a long article, Matthews claims that Stalin played a decisive role in 1950 in initiating the preparations for the 'British Road', and that he proposed some of its most important formulations - both roles which were concealed from the members by the party leadership. 20.

Matthews' claims are currently the subject of considerable debate amongst former Communist Party members, many violently disagreeing with Matthews, others commenting that it would have been inconceivable, given the nature of the Communist movement at the

time, that Stalin would not have had a view on a national party programme. Such a contribution would have been expected and welcomed. This latter position seems most likely; the CPGB at that time would not have taken any major political and theoretical initiative that was not broadly sanctioned by the international Communist movement.

Although the Executive Committee had announced its decision to appoint a Commission at its May meeting, the Commission did not actually meet until 15 August. The only reference made in May to the composition of the Commission was that Emile Burns 'would be responsible to the Political Committee for special work on theoretical questions and research, including the preparation of a draft of a new edition of the Party's programme 'The British Road to Socialism'.' 21.

No further reference was made in the party press until 'World News' printed George Matthews' Report to the Executive Committee meeting held on the 14th and 15th of July. Matthews reported that a Commission had been established and had begun work, on which a preliminary article would appear in a few weeks. Matthews went on to indicate some 'lines of thought' on the question, which, he assured the EC, were in no sense an attempt to pre-judge the work of the Commission.

First of all, Matthews recognised the importance of 'The British Road' as already published, and the great positive advance that it represented for the party in terms of new thinking and relevance to the British political situation. Secondly, Matthews went on to

specify five points that were of key importance in the revision of the programme:

a) the treatment of the question of 'People's Democracies' as a path to socialism, and the importance of taking into account specifically British conditions:

'While firmly adhering to the basic principle that the prerequisite for socialism is the winning of political power by the people, and while drawing on the experience of the Soviet people, the Chinese people and the peoples of Eastern Europe, we should nevertheless carefully consider how we can present our perspective for the advance to socialism even more specifically in relation to British conditions, and in a way which will be easily understood by the British Labour movement'. 22.

b) to reconsider and deal in a new way with the question of peaceful co-existence, bearing in mind recent world developments.

c) to strengthen and expand the section of the programme which dealt with British imperialist policy towards the 'colonial peoples' in the light of great advances made by colonial liberation movements since the end of the Second World War. These questions should also be considered with reference to the advances of the socialist system, and its ability to help former colonial countries maintain their independence from imperialism. It would also be necessary to look at passages dealing with the national independence of Britain, considering developments in the capitalist world. (This was,

presumably, referring to domination of Britain by the the United States of America).

d)to reconsider the language and general approach of the programme 'in order to present our policy in a way which will help to develop unity and ensure that the programme is seen by Labour people as an important factor in the discussions on the future which are now going on in the Labour movement'. 23.

e)to expand and develop sections on socialism, democracy and liberty. Matthews considered it necessary to recognise that democratic rights are the product of a long and bitter struggle in Britain, which at a certain point the bourgeoisie also played a part in fighting for, 'though never being prepared for thorough-going measures which would extend full democracy to all the people, and bitterly opposing every attempt of the colonial peoples to win democratic rights for themselves.' 24.

It was also noted that the capitalist class had ceased to act in defence of democratic rights, tending more to restrict them in order to maintain the capitalist system. But whilst recognising that the freedom of the exploiting minority would have to be restricted during the transition to socialism, more emphasis would have to be placed on 'the need for conscious measures to be taken to guarantee democratic rights for the people, to extend and develop democracy, and to prevent injustice.' Such measures would include safeguards against arbitrary action; the abolition of capital punishment; guaranteeing

of personal liberty; and freedom in scientific research and literary expression. Matthews also reiterated the party's commitment to a plurality of political parties, but also made it clear that there were no illusions that the ruling class would easily accept even a peaceful social revolution such as the British Road to Socialism envisaged, and therefore recognised the need for socialist legality to defend the socialist system:

'Socialist legality must certainly protect the rights of individuals, but it must also and in order to protect individuals, safeguard the socialist system.' 25.

Following Matthews' Report, various proposals were put to the Executive Committee for agreement, which included the strengthening and enlarging of the Commissions on 'The British Road to Socialism', and on Inner Party Democracy. Other interesting proposals which were agreed were that a National Party Congress should be called towards the end of 1956 or the beginning of 1957 - at least a year earlier than normal, that friendly relations should be established with the Yugoslav League of Communists, and that preparations should be made for the publication of a history of the Party.

In 'World News' of the 8th of September, the composition of the Commissions was announced. The 'British Road' Commission comprised sixteen members; nine of these were Executive Committee members: W. Alexander, Mick Bennett, Emile Burns, J.R. Campbell, R.P. Dutt, John Gollan, Arthur Jordan, Arnold Kettle and George Matthews; in addition

there were Peter Fryer of the 'Daily Worker' (later to achieve notoriety because of his despatches from Budapest during the Hungarian uprising); John Hostettler of the Party's Lawyers' Group; Monty Johnstone from the Young Communist League; and representatives from four Districts - Margaret Hunter from Scotland, Tom John from Lancashire, George Knox from North East District and Ralph Simons from West Middlesex District. Communications were to be addressed to Emile Burns.

The discussion was officially opened in 'World News' on the 22nd September by J.R. Campbell. Campbell outlined the suggested structure for the new draft as proposed by the Commission:

- ' (1) A new Introduction
- (2) A new section entitled 'Our Aim is Socialism'.
- (3) A re-write of the section entitled 'Peace and Friendship with all Peoples'.
- (4) A re-cast of the section entitled 'National Independence of the British People etc.'
- (5) A re-write of the section entitled 'People's Democracy - The Path to Socialism'.
- (6) A new section dealing with Democracy and Liberty.
- (7) Re-write of the section entitled 'Socialist Nationalisation and the Use of Britain's Resources'. ' 26.

In his article, J.R. Campbell elaborated mainly on the points outlined by George Matthews in his Executive Committee Report, but he did also mention some other more specific points. Regarding the new section entitled 'Our Aim is Socialism', Campbell noted that socialism was not currently mentioned until the second half of the document, and that furthermore:

'The section is written on the assumption that the reader of the programme already wants socialism, and that therefore the main purpose of the programme is simply to outline how he, in cooperation with others, can achieve it.

It is necessary, shortly and succinctly, to say what socialism is and why it will solve Britain's problems.' 27.

On social and cultural advance, Campbell felt that the treatment of science should be expanded, 'bringing in the need to develop research and the application of science for social needs, and the expansion of scientific and technological training.' 28.

Regarding socialist nationalisation, it was considered that the section should be strengthened by a much fuller treatment of the use of Britain's resources, for example:

'...the great scientific and technical advances of atomic energy and automation; Britain's human resources in skilled labour, technologists and scientists; the relative backwardness of sections of industry; the need for a national plan of development, which is only possible when all major industrial, financial and trading

concerns are nationally owned....Some of the economic problems involved in carrying out the programme should be referred to.' 29.

That same issue also announced the follow-up to the July Executive Committee meeting's decision to proceed with the preparations for the publication of a history of the Party. An Editing Commission of thirteen members was announced, chaired by Harry Pollitt, with six further comrades invited to be 'corresponding members' of the Editing Commission.

The discussion pages of 'World News', which was the main forum for debate within the party, were largely filled with wildly-raging controversy over democratic centralism and the question of inner-party democracy. The rewriting of the 'British Road' was a smooth process in comparison, although the nature of the future relationship between the British party and those of newly liberated former colonies was to be a minor battleground at the Special Congress. Some contributions were received however - one, for example, in the issue of 20 October, responded to J.R. Campbell's discussion opener, referring to it as 'a curate's egg of a document'. Ken Forge, of Great Missenden informed the readers that national independence was at the heart of the party's problem. The 'British Road', he suggested:

'...underestimates the world-shattering power of the national revolutionary movement in Asia, Africa and the Americas, and enormously overestimates the power of the imperialists'. 30.

Forge also lamented the absence of mention of the need for rights of secession for Wales, Ireland and Scotland, of clarification of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat', and of any mention of the exploited conditions of women.

That same issue of 'World News' also carried an announcement from the Commission:

'The Commission has now held five meetings, and is meeting weekly in order to complete its revision of 'The British Road to Socialism' by 24 November.

Its first meeting discussed the general lines of the proposed revision, and these were embodied in the article by Comrade J.R.Campbell in 'World News', 22 September.' 31.

The announcement also commented that contributions had been received from a few party organisations and individuals. One such individual contribution arrived on the 4th of October from Bill Bland of Ilford Branch (recently the secretary of the British-Albanian Friendship Society). Bill Bland offered to give evidence to the Commission to demonstrate that the 20th Congress of the CPSU showed that the Soviet Party had fallen into the hands of Trotskyists. The Congress decided that the matter was outside its terms of reference. 32.

The storms over the publication of 'The Reasoner' during the late summer, coupled with the intense debate over inner-party democracy which both detracted from possible interest in the 'British Road'

rewrite, were rapidly followed by the Suez crisis and Hungarian uprising of November 1956. Pleas from comrades like Queenie Knight from south east London fell on deaf, or otherwise occupied ears:

'Against a background of campaigning on issues and discussion of the fundamental questions of the British road to socialism, the problem of strengthening inner-party democracy will be seen in its proper proportion, and will be solved by our united desire to create the strongest possible machine to lead the struggle. I therefore believe that the interminable discussion in 'World News' on this subject should be closed and the space devoted to consideration of the amendment of the British Road to Socialism and experiences in the day to day job of building united action against the Tories.' 33.

The same issue also announced that the EC had decided to call a Special National Congress, which would take place the following Easter, from the 19th to the 22nd of April, 1957. Until the events in Hungary the EC had remained furiously opposed to calls for a Special Congress, considering only that a Special Conference was necessary. The provisional agenda of the Congress was to be a political report on behalf of the Executive Committee, a debate and vote on the work of the 'British Road to Socialism' Commission, and on that of the Inner-Party Democracy Commission, and the election of the Executive Committee and the Appeals Committee. As well as being necessary to strengthen the Party's fight for the defeat of the Tories, the unity of the Labour movement and the defence of peace, the Special Congress was also necessary:

'to pronounce decisively on the various tendencies towards diminishing the role of the Party or weakening its organisational principles which are showing themselves, and to take the necessary decisions to strengthen the fight to build the Party, the Young Communist League and the circulation of the 'Daily Worker'.' 34.

The Commission appointed by the Executive Committee to prepare a revised draft met thirteen times between 15 August and 1 December 1956. Of the sixteen comrades appointed to the Commission, two never attended, and Peter Fryer's name had disappeared from the Commission list by the time the draft was published in January of 1957. The Commission was referred to as having been chaired by John Gollan, who had become General Secretary of the Party after the retirement of Harry Pollitt, although initially Emile Burns, who was subsequently secretary of the Commission, was announced as holding this post. As John Gollan reported:

'The Commission received 12 contributions from the District Committees, Advisory Committees and Groups; 18 from Area Committees and Branches; and 21 from individual comrades; in addition to letters sent in to 'World News'. The Commission desires to express its thanks for all these contributions, which have been of great help in calling attention to points that needed to be considered and in suggesting useful formulations.' 35.

The draft was printed with three accompanying pages from the Executive Committee, making points that it thought should be included

and strengthened during the amendment process. These included, perhaps most importantly, the emphasis that the transition to socialism is a long and difficult struggle; that there should be more detailed treatment of the organisational forms of the popular alliance which would establish socialism, including references to the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and working class unity; reference to the need for class struggle both before and after a Socialist Government is established; and further regarding class struggle:

'There have been tendencies in recent discussions suggesting that a peaceful transition to socialism means a complete absence of class struggle. We have to make it clear that it is only through political and industrial mass struggles that the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism can become a reality.' 36.

Although not emphasised by the EC in its comments, there had been some debate around the question of the rights of opposition parties under a Socialist government. The formulation as arrived at in the draft guaranteed the right of political parties to maintain their organisations, press and propaganda and to take part in elections. These rights were challenged through amendment at the Special Congress, but overwhelmingly upheld. 37.

The draft appeared as endorsed unanimously by the Commission, with the exception of one section - that on the alliance of the British people with the peoples of the Empire. As the draft's introduction stated:

'On the only issue on which there was a difference of opinion on the Commission - the question of the future relations between a Socialist Britain and all the Empire countries - the Executive Committee, by 29 votes to 5, with one abstention, decided to support the paragraph put forward by the majority of the Commission.' 38.

The controversial paragraphs were the following:

a) the majority position as endorsed by the Executive Committee:

'...a Socialist Government in Britain would:

Recognise the complete independence and right of self-determination of all countries in the Colonial Empire at the time of its coming to power; and for this purpose withdraw all armed forces from the colonial and dependent territories or occupied spheres of influence, and hand over sovereignty to Governments freely chosen by the peoples;

Propose to all countries of the Commonwealth and former Empire voluntary participation in a close fraternal association, based on national independence, equal rights and non-intervention in each other's internal affairs, to promote their mutual economic, political and cultural interests, and for mutual defence against any imperialist attempts to undermine their independence.' 39.

b) the minority position as presented as an alternative to the draft at Congress:

'...a Socialist Government in Britain would:

Promote close voluntary fraternal relations for economic, political and cultural co-operation of mutual benefit, on the basis of national independence, equal rights and non-interference in internal affairs, between Britain and the liberated colonial countries and all countries of the existing Commonwealth willing to develop such relations.' 40.

In his report to the Congress before the discussion and voting on the draft, George Matthews argued for the 'close fraternal association' on the grounds that:

'A Socialist government in Britain should not, and will not be able to, wash its hands of the problems arising from the existence of the British Empire.

An association on a new basis is needed because of the existence of economic and political realities arising from a long history of imperialist domination.

It is needed to enable a Socialist Britain to fulfil its responsibilities to the former colonial peoples, to help them develop their countries, and the distortions of their economies which have resulted from the imperialist rule, carry through industrialisation and modernise their agriculture.

It is in the interests of Britain also, since it would put an end to the huge burdens on our economy resulting from imperialist relations and colonial wars, and enable fruitful trading and economic relations to be established on the basis of equal rights.

This is why it will be the duty of a Socialist government in Britain to propose such an association. Such a proposal would not be in conflict with the principle of Socialist internationalism, but would be an expression of those principles.' 41.

Such a proposal, however, did not find favour with R. Palme Dutt, the Party's leading expert on imperialism and the colonial question. Himself of Swedish and Indian parentage, Palme Dutt was highly respected both within and outside the Party; his reputation as Editor of 'Labour Monthly' was considerable, and his 'Notes of the Month' within that journal were widely studied and used within the Party. Clearly the lamentable 'spots on the sun' episode earlier in the year did not undermine the esteem in which comrades held his judgement on colonial matters. Palme Dutt's view that a 'close fraternal association' smacked of imperialist domination won the vote and the minority position was carried against the wishes of the Executive Committee - a rare occurrence indeed. On that particular point, Monty Johnstone found himself in agreement with Palme Dutt, and formed part of the minority on the Commission. Johnstone did not always find himself in harmony with Dutt however:

'Dutt attacked a YCL draft on youth that I introduced which stated that 'we can be happy that in many ways life is happier today for young people than it was for their parents'. Dutt said this was presenting a 'certificate of merit to capitalism'! Most people agreed with me that it reflected the increased strength of the labour movement to win concessions.' 42.

Following the voting on amendments at the Special Congress, a resolution agreed the further handling of the party programme. The revised draft, amendments and comments were remitted to the incoming Executive Committee, which was instructed to prepare a new text on the basis of the discussion at Congress and the material sent in by the Party organisations. The Executive Committee would then submit the new text of the programme to the party districts and branches for their comments, and would then finalise it in the light of these comments and publish it as the Party programme.

The new edition was published in February, 1958.

Notes:

1. Executive Committee Resolution, 13 May 1956.
2. Ibid.
3. 'For Soviet Britain', London, 1935, page 26.
4. Ibid., page 8.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., page 5.
7. 'State and Revolution', Lenin's Selected Works, Moscow, 1977, page 267.
8. 'History of the CPSU(B)', Moscow, 1939, page 111.
9. 'The British Road to Socialism' (BRS), London, 1952, page 12.
10. 'Britain for the People', London, 1944, page 8.
11. Ibid., page 20.
12. WN, 1 February 1947.

13. WN, 8 March 1947.
14. 'Looking Ahead', Harry Pollitt, London, 1947, page 104.
15. WN&V, 20 December 1947.
16. Ibid.
17. WN&V, 7 August 1948.
18. Pollitt's Report to the Executive Committee, July 1950.
19. Ibid.
20. 'Changes', 14 September 1991.
21. WN, 19 May 1956.
22. WN, 21 July 1956.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. WN, 22 September 1956.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. WN, 20 October 1956.

31. Ibid.

32. Monty Johnstone, Commission member representing the Young Communist League - letter of 15 August 1990.

33. WN, 17 November 1956.

34. Ibid.

35. Draft Revised Text of BRS, London, 1957.

36. Ibid., page (iv).

37. Interview with Monty Johnstone - October 1991.

38. Draft Revised Text of BRS, page (iv).

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Monty Johnstone's letter of 15 August 1990.

Chapter Seven

The Commission on Inner-Party Democracy

The Executive Committee also set up what was termed the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy, established to examine the methods and working of the Communist Party Congress, its committees, methods of discussion and election, criticism and self-criticism, and the improvement of inner-Party democracy. It was, in short, to investigate the system of democratic centralism - the principles of which were the basis for the organisational structure of the party. Any questioning of democratic centralism was itself a highly emotive nature - for as a set of principles for organisation, it had become for many one of Communism's absolute truths - a central tenet of Marxism-Leninism. Whilst some party members (see above re: 'The Reasoner') regarded it as a fatally-flawed anti-democratic system which had made it possible for one man to secure unreasonable power within his own hands, many considered that it enabled vital unity in action, and at most there had been abuses of it; in other words that there was nothing wrong with democratic centralism in principle. The 'Leninist principle' of democratic centralism was first formulated in 1905, within the Russian revolutionary movement, as an attempt to achieve both organisational cohesion and the adoption of democratic procedures. During the pre-revolutionary period it seems likely that the Bolsheviks did ensure democratic participation within their party, and that free expression and circulation of ideas was

considered to be a vital part of this. It was in the period after the 1917 revolution that:

'An authoritarian pattern of political relationships emerged in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union in which there was no shortage of organisation, but in which electoral activity was eclipsed by a process of nomination and in which the written and spoken word was subjected to severe and at times savage controls.' 1.

With the foundation of the Comintern in 1919, all member parties were expected to adopt organisational principles based on those of the Russian Communist Party, and so the Communist Party of Great Britain had similar rules to those of the RCP(B). The definition of democratic centralism as given in the Statutes of the CPSU, as adopted in 1934, is as follows:

- '1. The application of the elective principle to all leading organs of the party from the highest to the lowest;
 2. Periodic accountability of party organs to their respective party organisations;
 3. Strict party discipline and the subordination of the minority to the majority;
 4. The absolutely binding character of the decisions of the higher organs upon the lower organs and upon party members.'
- 2.

The CPGB's rule book, (the 1952 version, which was in use in 1956) puts these principles in the following way:

'The organisational structure of the Party is based on the principles of democratic centralism:

- a) The election of all leading Party Committees.
 - b) The responsibility of all such leading Party Committees to submit reports at regular intervals to the Party organisations which have elected them.
 - c) Minorities shall accept the decisions of the majority.
 - d) The lower Party organisations shall accept the decisions of the higher Party organisations.'
- 3.

Deceptively simple when defined in this way, democratic centralism represented far more than this in reality, perhaps most significantly in regard to differing views within the Party, and the development of anything which could be considered as factional activity, the outlawing and intolerance of which was carried to its worst extremes in the Soviet Union during the purges of the 1930s. The intensity with which Party members felt about these questions is more easily understood after reading Stalin's writings on the Party, in 'Foundations of Leninism':

'The achievement and maintenance of the dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible without a party which is strong by reason of its solidarity and iron discipline. But iron discipline in the Party is inconceivable without unity of will, without complete and absolute unity of action on the part of all members of the Party. This does not mean, of course, that the possibility of contests of opinion within the Party is thereby precluded. On the contrary, iron

discipline does not preclude but presupposes criticism and contest of opinion within the Party...But after a contest of opinion has been closed, after criticism has been exhausted and a decision has been arrived at, unity of will and unity of action of all Party members are the necessary condition without which neither Party unity nor iron discipline in the Party is conceivable.' 4.

Such, Stalin pointed out, was the position in regard to Party discipline in the period of struggle preceding the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But such discipline was to be carried even further, echoing Stalin's intensification of the class struggle theory referred to above:

'The same, but to an even greater degree, must be said about discipline in the Party after the dictatorship has been achieved. 'Whoever in the least,' says Lenin, 'weakens the iron discipline of the party of the proletariat (especially during its dictatorship) actually aids the bourgeoisie against the proletariat.' (Lenin, 'Selected Works', Vol X, p.84) 5.

Also within this section of 'Foundations of Leninism' is found a thoroughgoing condemnation of factionalism, raising the fears about splitting the party and weakening its work that were used against Saville and Thompson (see chapter above on 'The Reasoner').

'...from this it follows that the existence of factions is incompatible either with the Party's unity or with its iron

discipline. It need hardly be proved that the existence of factions leads to the existence of a number of centres, and the existence of a number of centres connotes the absence of one common centre in the Party, the breaking up of the unity of will, the weakening and disintegration of discipline, the weakening and disintegration of the dictatorship.' 6.

Such was the prevailing ethos within the Communist Party on the question of democratic centralism, and not surprisingly, therefore, the work of the Commission was of a highly controversial nature. At the Executive Committee of July 1956, a commission of 15 was appointed, of which ten were full-time party workers. Nine were appointed directly by the Executive Committee and six by party districts. Of the non-full-timers, one was a 'Daily Worker' journalist, two were teachers, one a university lecturer, and one an industrial worker.

The EC declared that it had sought to bring together a variety of experience from different areas of the party, including those 'who were known, from the discussion in the party press, to have critical views on various aspects of the problem'.

In the event, after eleven meetings, totalling more than fifty hours, the Commission was unable to agree unanimously to a report, and so both a Majority and Minority Report were submitted to the Special Congress. The Minority Report was signed by three members of the Commission, Christopher Hill, Peter Cadogan and Malcolm MacEwen, who felt that the proposals put forward by the Majority would:

'...perpetuate the bureaucratic centralism that has had such disastrous results in Eastern Europe'. 7.

Not only did the Minority Report put forward proposals which would have made significant changes to the nature of democratic centralism; it also reflected at some length on the question of discussion within the party, and drew parallels with the lack of democracy and open debate in countries run by Communist Parties:

'To see how serious can be the consequences of insisting upon the complete control of discussion by the Executive Committee one must look at those countries where the Party controls the state power and puts this policy into practice on a nationwide scale. For when the Party extends its control to the entire press, all independent political publication comes to an end, and the press becomes in politics at least a gramophone sounding the official Party policy.'

8.

Clearly those subscribing to the Minority Report had understood what many Communist Parties have only faced up to under pressure of recent revolutionary events - that Democratic Centralism within the party, or writ large as a one-party-dominated state, destroys democracy, debate and political creativity. The Minority Report was arguing for radical change, but also clearly within the context of a Communist Party:

'In the view of this minority, unless the British Communist Party becomes fully independent, is thoroughly democratic in its inner-party life, and stands for the development of a democratic Socialism, the Party will be unable to exert political influence in the British Labour movement, and will be unable to lead the advance to Socialism in Britain...

In the view of this minority the Party's future can only be assured if there is a decisive change in the policy of the Party, and if those Party leaders who are sticking to outworn and discredited policies and methods inherited from the past change their views or are removed.' 9.

Such ideas, also echoed by 'The Reasoner' were to be rejected by the leadership. Indeed, the Minority Report was rejected by the Executive Committee and subsequently by the Congress because, as John Mahon commented:

'...its proposals would amount to the disintegration of the Communist Party as a unified political organisation. By introducing a federalised Executive, legalising factions, relieving those who disagree with Party decisions from the obligation to fight for them while granting them the right to campaign against them, the Minority Report would end party unity and discipline and reduce the Party to an assembly of contending sects incapable of giving leadership to the working class.' 10.

The essence of the political point was not really addressed.

The historian Christopher Hill, who supported the Minority Report, made complaints about the brevity of the period allowed for discussion by the group - a little under three months. Along with MacEwen and Cadogan, Hill felt that an interim report should have been made allowing for a much longer period for substantial investigation into the views of party members.

Hill was also of the view that some of the other Commission members were interested in democratising the party, apart from those supporting the Minority Report, such as Nora Jeffrey, the National Women's Organiser, and James Klugmann, full-time party worker on propaganda and education. He considered, however, that Lauchlan, Mahon and Reid were not interested in any change. William Lauchlan was full-time National Organiser, John Mahon, the chairman of the Commission was full-time London District Secretary (referred to by Malcolm MacEwen as 'an inflexible Party functionary with a limited imagination'), and Betty Reid, the secretary of the Commission, worked full-time in the Central Organisation Department. According to Hill, the one industrial worker, Kevin Halpin, was with the Minority group throughout the discussions, and changed only at the last minute to support for the Majority Report, appending three pages of reservations and additions in his name to it.

Hill considers that pressure may have been brought to bear on Halpin not to side with the 'wobbly intellectuals' of the Minority Report. He also suggests that those who eventually constituted the Minority Report group were specifically chosen by the EC as a safety valve because it was known that they were people who would 'shoot their

mouths off'; that perhaps the leadership felt that people had to blow off steam, and that allowing them to do it in this way would isolate them from potential support. Maurice Cornforth, for example, told Hill that he was half in favour of the Minority Report, but felt that it was 'a bit strong'.

In more general terms, Hill was of the opinion that the dissent in the party during the 1956 period was not so much because of what had happened in the Soviet Union, but because the party leadership refused to let this change their approach. The members did not become primarily anti-Soviet, but very opposed to what he considered to be the party leadership's pro-Soviet sycophancy. 11.

Hill spent ten months in the Soviet Union, in 1935-6, and was impressed by what he saw. He went there to do freelance historical research on Soviet work on English 17th century history and joined the Communist Party when he returned to England. On his return he read reports about Soviet life in the bourgeois press that he knew to be unfounded, and so developed what he called a 'built in refusal' to believe what the bourgeois press wrote. When he was in Moscow, he rented a room illegally, in the flat of a kulak, who was serving two years in Siberia for 'speculation'. Hill was still there when the kulak returned home to his wife in the best of health, and formed a strong opinion that the camps were for genuine re-education. This experience, combined with obvious lies in the press, led Hill genuinely to disbelieve reports of the show trials of the late 1930s. Yet despite his criticisms, Hill genuinely admired many of the British Party leaders. He thought that Pollitt was a great speaker and very witty, and also admired Emile Burns and Douglas Garman. It

was the second rank, those he termed 'bureaucrats', that he considered to be so bad. Hill thought that the leadership saw everything in black and white terms: capitalism - bad, socialism - good, and were very influenced by the Cold War situation, and not wanting to help US imperialism by casting any aspersions on the Soviet Union.

What Hill really wanted was to remain within the Party, which would change, he hoped, taking into account the revelations about the abuses of the Soviet system, becoming fully democratised. It was his commitment to democratisation of the Party which made him reject the path that those such as Thompson and Saville chose, in producing 'The Reasoner', that is to say, flagrantly breaking party rules. He was rather shocked by 'The Reasoner', and thought it provocative, but this was really only a tactical disagreement because he thought that people should stay in and fight. This was what made him eager to join the Commission on Inner Party Democracy. He hoped that the Commission would produce a unanimous report to bring about significant changes, but membership of this Commission, followed by the response to the Report at the Special Congress in 1957, made him feel that democratisation was impossible.

Malcolm MacEwen, who was also a signatory to the Minority Report, was a party member of considerable standing. He had been a member of the Central Committee in 1941-3, and a Parliamentary candidate in 1941 and 1950; unlike Hill, he appears to have been under no illusion that significant change was likely to be achieved:

'The composition of the Commission guaranteed that it would not reach any conclusions disturbing to the full-time professional leadership whose grip on the Party (as we showed in the minority report) was maintained by the self-perpetuating system of 'election'. John Mahon, the chairman, did not see his role as leading an investigation; he saw it as securing the defeat of the 'revisionists' who were critical of democratic centralism.' 12.

MacEwen objected, in particular, to the brief period assigned to the Commission for the enormous task which it had to perform, and to the programme of work outlined for the Commission by Betty Reid. MacEwen submitted a 4,000 word paper at the beginning of work, in which he pointed out that it was quite clear that 'textbook explanations of democratic centralism bore no relation to the actual way in which the Soviet Party or Soviet society operated.' 13.

He called for a realistic examination of the functioning of inner-party democracy in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The majority, whilst admitting that Soviet democracy was not functioning perfectly, resisted this suggestion because of the time constraints upon the group and because of the impossibility of examining the Soviet Party. MacEwen then asked that the Commission should look at three specific cases within the British Party: the handling of the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, the handling of the Party press since the 20th Congress, and the operation of the electoral system at national and district Party congresses. MacEwen felt, however, that while the majority of Commission members did not deny the desirability of questioning witnesses and interviewing members about

these specific issues, they in fact refused to call for real evidence, or to examine witnesses or investigate Party records on those issues or any others.

'The Commission received no real evidence at all. The only 'evidence' we had to go on was a mass of letters and branch resolutions, and only one of these (a letter from the London District Committee) was submitted by a major Party organisation. None of the Party's leading officials or members offered evidence; nor were they asked to give it.' 14.

MacEwen observed that the Commission was split from the very beginning into two groups - the ten fulltime party workers, that he considered to be operating under instructions from the party leadership, and the five rank-and-file members. Of these five, three signed the Minority Report, and the other two, including Kevin Halpin, the only industrial worker on the Commission, both attached major reservations to the Majority Report which they ultimately signed. MacEwen is of the view that the leadership actively sought to split the critics - not least because it would have been embarrassing if the five ordinary members of the Commission had rejected the line of the officials:

'There were several reasons for the officials' success in splitting the critics. Above all they were able to apply immense moral and political pressure to both Halpin and Cheek - and to Halpin in particular - playing on the enormously strong tradition of Party

loyalty at a time when the Party was under immense strain and intense attack.' 15.

Perhaps the most critical event, however, was the writing of a letter by Peter Cadogan to the 'News Chronicle' criticising the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November. For this Cadogan was suspended from the Party - he had gone to the bourgeois press to differ with the Party line. The next meeting of the Commission was suspended, because, MacEwen reports, Betty Reid refused to sit down at the same table with a 'traitor'. Hill, Cadogan and MacEwen went to a pub to draft a letter to John Gollan, the Party's General Secretary, and from then on the lines of division within the Commission were quite clear.

The views of Betty Reid on this question of the Commission are very interesting - not least because they underline once again the great gulf between the approaches of the leadership and of the dissidents - there was no real point of contact. The signatories to the Minority Report, in common with the supporters of 'The Reasoner', were concerned primarily with the complete degeneration of democratic centralism in Eastern Europe and the abysmal situations which this had allowed including the political and moral collapse of those parties. Whilst the British party was not in a position to wield power, as the party was based on the same form of democratic centralism then presumably it was possible, indeed likely, that should the party ever win power, a similar process of degeneration would follow. While these questions exercised the minds of many party members, the leadership, and undoubtedly many of the membership too,

were prepared to endorse democratic centralism without reservations, conceding only that errors had arisen in its application. In view of this then, the intention of the majority of the Commission members must have been to defend democratic centralism and the existing party structures from attack:

'We were confident that we should fight back to maintain the fibre and organisation of the party and not allow the experience of the Soviet Union to be brought back onto the party in Britain. We were prepared to say that it was the violation of democratic centralism and not the operation of it that gave rise to the problems in the Soviet Union, and that reinforced the determination of the Majority Report to fight for maintaining democratic centralism.' 16.

Betty Reid, who was the Secretary of the Commission, was very much of the view that the party should not allow the emotional impact of what had gone wrong to let them give way to the people who were throwing up their hands in horror; that this shouldn't affect the major political thrust of the party and what it had done to try and prevent the second world war, and its fight during the war.

'We were very much concerned with holding the party together, so to that extent we were conservative. We wanted to consolidate and overcome the avalanche. I don't think that was wrong because we felt that what were being revealed were not the weaknesses of democratic centralism but the violations of it, and also of the Stalin Constitution. There was nothing to complain about what was written

but our concern was that there was a failure to operate the Constitution. It was just a piece of paper. The forces of the state were at the command of the ruling group and they were used to control and decimate. But it was not relevant or acceptable to parallel those happenings in Britain's conditions. We had to make every effort to be as strong and controlled and unified as possible against the ruling class we were facing. It wasn't helpful to compare our situation to that of the socialist countries.

We felt that people like Saville and Thompson and Christopher Hill, because they were taking a high moral attitude on what was involved in the Soviet Union were attempting to apply those principles to a situation that was totally different. While we wanted to examine the whole question of inner-party democracy it had to be in the context of a revolutionary party based on democratic centralism, based on the requirements of like-minded individuals coming together in an organisation which had the intention of fighting the ruling class. That's really where the differences were.' 17.

Debate around these questions raged within the party, and dominated the pages of 'World News' for many issues. As early as the 12th of May, a letter from B.B. of London SE3 recorded the following view:

'Democratic centralism is the most democratic method of group discussion and group action. But to work justly and effectively it requires (1) the attendance of the large majority; (2) a high level of political development of each comrade; (3) active and lively participation; and (4) the forbearance of strong-willed

personalities.

In most cases in our Party these conditions are not present. The result has been that democratic centralism has become all too often a ritual by which a few - maybe a minority - determine a course of action.' 18.

The first major contribution on this subject, however, came from George Matthews, Assistant General Secretary of the CPGB, as part of his report delivered to the Executive Committee at its meeting of the 14th and 15th of July, 1956. In a section entitled 'The Communist Party', Matthews quotes the definition of democratic centralism in the Party rules, and observes that the question was now being raised as to whether the Party should continue to base itself on the principles of democratic centralism. The two most common arguments advanced for change were the following:

'a) Democratic centralism in the Soviet Union resulted in, or at any rate, did not prevent, the abuses of the 1934-53 period.

b) Democratic centralism may be necessary for a Party operating under illegal or semi-legal conditions or in time of war, but is unsuitable in the conditions of Britain.' 19.

Matthews' response to this was that the first argument presented a picture which was the opposite of the truth - that the trouble with the Soviet Union was not the principles of democratic centralism, but that fact that they were not observed - that centralism was overstressed at the expense of democracy. Regarding the second

argument, Matthews admitted that the operation of democratic centralism will vary in different conditions - that the way it is put into effect will vary under legal or illegal conditions. The principles of democratic centralism held good, however, for any revolutionary working class party aiming to lead the working people to the end of capitalism and the establishment of socialism:

'The fight in conditions such as we face in Britain assumes different forms, but is no less difficult than in many other countries...It requires organisation, discipline, leadership and a united fight for a general line of policy once this is decided. This is completely compatible with a mass Party, as the experience of other countries shows. To think otherwise is again to underestimate the task we face in Britain, with a powerful and cunning capitalist class determined to maintain its rule. We should therefore not agree to proposals which would mean the end of the Communist Party and its transformation into a kind of social-democratic organisation.' 20.

Matthews recognised that there were grave weaknesses in the operation of democratic centralism within the British Party, but asserted that this had not been the result of 'a conscious decision to hamper discussion and controversy', but rather of a failure to stimulate these. 'It has been', said Matthews, 'a sin of omission rather than of commission'. He highlighted various areas of weakness, such as low participation in pre-Congress discussions, a lack of communication between the Executive Committee and the branches, and the need to improve collective leadership. Matthews also referred to the

Commission that had been set up by the Executive Committee. Curiously enough, although this report was given in July, and MacEwen stated that the IPD Commission had its first meeting on September 11th, Matthews also went on to say that the Commission had already done a good deal of work. The EC would also be reviewing its own methods of work and leadership to eliminate weaknesses and improve its collective work. The Report concluded by making six proposals, intended to 'continue the discussion in a way which will improve our political understanding, unite our ranks, and give new inspiration to all our work':

1. To convene a National Party Conference, either at the end of 1956 or early 1957.
2. To strengthen and enlarge the IPD and BRS Commissions.
3. To publish an interim article from the IPD Commission to stimulate branch contributions.
4. To do the same later on for the BRS debate.
5. To establish friendly relations with the Yugoslav League of Communists.
6. To prepare and publish a history of the Party.

'World News' of the 18th of August, 1956, published a letter from Bridget and Christopher Hill on the question of Inner-Party Democracy. They pointed to specific questions which they felt needed to be discussed within the Party. In particular they felt that something seemed to have 'gone wrong' in the relations between the leadership and the rank-and-file; that on the one hand many comrades

felt that decisions were taken "in King Street" (the party's national headquarters) without sufficient consultation with the rank-and-file, and on the other hand, many at various leadership levels complained because they didn't get enough help in policy formation from the membership. To rectify this situation called, the Hills said, for more than formal constitutional change:

'What is required is an ending of the habit of 'waiting for the line' below, and of handing out 'the line' from on top...Is democratic centralism...the most satisfactory method in British conditions...Or is it merely convenient to those 'on top'? Has it helped to create the routine attitude of uncritical acceptance which has prevailed in the Party?' 21.

The Hills were also sharply critical of the way Edward Thompson's article 'Winter Wheat from Omsk' was handled, in particular because of its accompaniment by a reply from George Matthews:

'Why must there be an official reply to an article intended as a contribution to discussion? Why must we be told from 'on top' what to think? Why could it not have been left to the readers to form their own opinions and send in their own comments, on what Edward Thompson had to say? Why must criticisms of the leadership, as soon as it becomes serious, be 'answered' as though it is an attack on the Party?...Are the rank and file really not to be trusted to think things out for themselves?' 22.

The letter ended with a request for publication not only of official statements from parties in the socialist countries in the British party press, but also of critical contributions made to discussion by the rank and file. In particular they referred to censorship even of official party statements; articles for example from the CPUSA appeared on occasion to be excluded from the party press and were able to be read only in the capitalist press: 'Is there here, too, a feeling 'on top' that there are certain things we are not to be trusted to see?'

On the 1st of September, an article by John Mahon appeared in 'World News', intended to open and stimulate discussion in the party around the question of inner-party democracy, to help the Commission to prepare its report. Mahon's article opened with something of a rallying cry:

'The aim of the Communist Party is to achieve a Socialist Britain. This requires not only Socialist propaganda, but the mobilisation of the working class and all working people in the struggle that leads on to the ending of capitalist rule, working class power and the building of socialism.

The whole experience of the British working class in its struggles against the property-owning class shows the need for organisation and discipline. How much greater, therefore is the need for organisation and discipline for a political party whose socialist aim requires the mobilisation of the people in the present struggles to defend and

improve conditions and in all the struggles that lead up to the winning of working class power.' 23.

Mahon went on to argue that only the method of organisation known as democratic centralism could carry through this struggle, allowing unity of purpose and action through the combination of democracy and centralised leadership. The main thrust of Mahon's article was that democratic centralism was essential, it needed only to be made to work more effectively. Points which he highlighted for improvement were:

- a) finding ways of ensuring that all members participate in political discussion and the shaping of policy and forms of action.
- b) that comrades in leading positions should welcome new ideas and give serious consideration to points of view that are put forward.
- c) that decisions should be the result of collective discussion and the pooling of experience and views, rather than being made by individuals.
- d) that there is a need for real understanding and application in practice of criticism and self-criticism.

The main task now, he considered, was to find ways, through suggestions from the whole party, of improving the working of democratic centralism. This article appears to be rather pre-emptive of an open and full discussion on democratic centralism; the parameters set by Mahon were clear - the issue was not to be around whether democratic centralism was a desirable system or not, no real

analysis of its workings - merely some minimal gestures towards improving participation from the bottom up. One of the chief emphases was on action rather than on discussion for its own sake:

'Discussions centred on our own problems, and linked with the living experience of the members and branches, will help to strengthen our mass work and not be a distraction from it.

For the same reason, discussion must reach practical conclusions - it cannot remain discussion, without any end or any purpose related to action.' 24.

The emphasis here is also on 'our own problems' trying to deflect discussion from around the Soviet Union. Mahon also gave some views on the election of the Executive Committee, which was elected through a Panels Committee, which met together in advance of the Congress to draw up a recommended list which would provide a politically balanced leadership for the party. Previous methods had been dropped in favour of the panels system:

'It was inevitable that industrial workers at the bench were not known throughout the Party; and therefore this method made it most difficult for workers from the bench to be elected, did not result in a properly balanced Executive, but one that was overweighted with full-time Party workers, speakers and writers...

The retiring Executive Committee, with its knowledge of the need of the Party and of the work of comrades, considers the nominations sent in by branches and District Committees, and draws up a first list

which it puts before the Panels Commission...

This method is far more democratic than the so-called 'free vote', for individual delegates cannot know all the candidates and their respective merits...' 25.

In the following issue of 'World News', the approach of John Mahon was very much backed up in an article entitled 'The Role of the Leadership', by Barbara Wiseman of Banstead in Surrey. Questioning the direction of the discussion around the Twentieth Congress, she found a great deal of it 'leading nowhere', except 'to a sort of woolly liberalism'. Wiseman was responding to an article by George Houston in the issue of 11 August, which had suggested that if no practical decision was required, for example on theoretical questions, then there should be no need for the minority to submit to the majority view. Wiseman was of the view that theory could not stand on its own, but was an integral part of practical work:

'Theoretical questions' are not abstract questions, but relate to our actual work and the programme we put before the people. They have to be decided not left in the air.

Marx once said, correctly in my opinion, that 'theory becomes a material force when it has gripped the masses'. Presumably this is what we want our theory to do, what we work for.' 26.

She also criticised the view of Bridget and Christopher Hill, who wrote of 'the normal function' of branches being to 'guide and assist the leadership':

'It certainly seems that there must be something wrong somewhere if the branches are full of experienced comrades, able to guide the leadership, and who are not themselves participating in the leadership. If we are so confident that the tail is capable of wagging the dog, why have a leadership at all?' 27.

Wiseman did not accept the points made by those seriously questioning democratic centralism, and attempting to explore its anti-democratic nature and its relationship to the abuses of power in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Rather she argued for the view of the leadership, and what was to emerge as the Majority position from the IPD Commission - that mistakes had been made, but this was no reason to throw away what she considered to be essential organisational principles:

'We are very lucky. Other comrades in other places have blazed the trail for us. The Soviet comrades provided the test case for socialism. They have made terrible mistakes, for which we have little right to reproach them, because we have never gained a position in which such mistakes were possible. Those mistakes need never be made again, anywhere, because we can learn from them. But let us not, because of these mistakes, fall into the mistake ourselves of throwing overboard the most fundamental principles of a Party of a new type.' 28.

The issue of 'World News' of the 22nd of September carried a major article by Ken Alexander of Sheffield, who had also had an article on

Democratic Centralism published by the first issue of 'The Reasoner' in July 1956 (see above Chapter Five). The main thrust of Alexander's argument was that unless the very real questions being asked about democratic centralism, as to why it worked so badly in the Soviet Union, were answered, then comrades would not regain their confidence in the Party, and their willingness to fight to put power in the hands of communists. Alexander's central question was whether there was something in the nature of democratic centralism which could too easily lead to the breakdown of democratic processes. The feature which he particularly suspected was not related to the desirability of adherence to decisions once taken, but rather to how they were actually arrived at:

'Under democratic centralism, the power to take decisions is centralised and the ability of members and lower bodies to influence or change decisions of higher bodies is constricted and controlled by these higher bodies, by limiting the interchange of opinion between members, branches or lower bodies that can take place to that permitted by higher bodies.' 29.

Alexander stressed that he was not suggesting that courses of action contrary to Party policy could be pursued by individual members or lower bodies, rather that there should be greater freedom of expression and discussion available for party members. He went on to make five practical proposals:

1) that main items on EC agendas should be published well in advance of the meetings so that individuals or organisations could write expressing their views to the General Secretary or other EC members, and that where possible the EC should refrain from a decision until full discussion had been held throughout the party. He emphasised that he was not suggesting that the EC should surrender its responsibility to take decisions between Congresses, but that it should take much greater pains to draw upon party opinion at lower levels.

2) that members of committees who were in a minority on some point should be allowed to express their opinions in discussion at lower levels of the party. Such a practice, he observed had already been introduced by the Communist Party of the USA. This would be particularly important when it came to the election of the leadership.

3) that every branch, area, district or specialist committee should have the right to have its views printed in the party press.

4) that discussion of policy other than in party organisations should be allowed; the right of members to express their opinion to any other member not in their own branch should be established.

5) that the right to publish, independent of control should be recognised.

Alexander thought that there was a strong possibility that unless democratic centralism was adapted, the party would not get the opportunity of carrying through its programme. But what he felt was more important than this was that unless it were adapted, the party would not be able to give reality to its aspirations even if it were given the opportunity:

'Our aspiration is to transform and enrich the lives of men and women. We never tire of asserting the many-sidedness of our work and of what Marxism can do for human understanding and development. Yet in John Mahon's article...there was no recognition that it is from the Party, as a result of its discussions and decisions, that we expect this development and enrichment to grow.' 30.

Rather, Alexander felt, there was the conception of the party as an efficient machine dedicated to those high ends, but quite unable to be part of them, and therefore unable, in practice, to bring them about.

Alexander's article was replied to in 'World News' of the 6th of October by Peter Kerrigan, a leading party full-time official. Kerrigan emphasised that there had been absolutely nothing in the structure, organisation or rules of the party to prevent the type of discussion that critics of democratic centralism were arguing for. Indeed, in his view, sustained efforts had been made to stimulate the maximum discussion, and full facilities had been available in the party press for the expression of all points of view. Kerrigan drew a distinction between those who reasonably wanted to improve upon the

status quo, and those like Alexander, who challenged the fundamental principles of party organisation. Such radical change as Alexander appeared to want, would, in Kerrigan's view:

'...witness grave damage to the effectiveness of the Party as a fighting force.' 31.

Kerrigan also enquired as to whether it was perhaps wrong to refer to majorities and minorities within the Communist Party, which was, after all, a united party:

'But is it not wrong to counterpose minority and majority in this way as far as the Communist Party is concerned? In the Labour Party we see a broad division of policy which has existed since the Labour Party was founded. The terms 'right wing' and 'left wing' in fact show the deep differences of ideology and outlook which exist in the Labour Party, and which determine the pattern of discussion and struggle which take place within it.

But no such division exists within the Communist Party. We are united by a common ideology and outlook. Discussion for us is the development of Party policy and tactics in the light of our Marxist-Leninist principles.' 32.

Such a statement throws into even sharper relief the gulf between the party leadership and those within the party who were questioning what these fundamentals actually were. For Mahon and Kerrigan, there was absolutely no question that democratic centralism was an

indispensable principle for party organisation. It is equally clear that there was serious division within the party over this question, and also that the question of common ideology and outlook was also now at issue. Without doubt the dissenters were committed Marxists and communists, but what were now emerging were differences in interpretation, and a willingness to dispense with so-called 'principles' of Marxism-Leninism, which were in fact merely mirror images of Soviet structures that had, for that very reason, become enshrined in party rule and held sacrosanct by the leadership. The debate on democratic centralism was to run on and on within the party press - 'World News' continued to print major articles on the subject, as well as very many letters. One particularly interesting letter was from E.J.Hobsbawm, the historian, who wrote in as someone who felt that the party should 'stick to democratic centralism', but should be able to apply its principles in a flexible way:

'While we are always democratic centralists, we apply these principles differently as conditions change. Our Party rules, the official formulation of democratic centralism, have changed twice since 1932: in 1943, reflecting the phase of anti-fascist unity - but for the war they would have been changed earlier - and in 1952, reflecting the cold war. Since we are in a new phase of development today, we ought to revise our rules accordingly. Again, the methods of electing our committees are not sacrosanct. From 1943 to 1946 the executive committee was elected without a panel, and it does not follow that the arguments which led the Party to abandon this method

nine years ago are still valid, for the situation is not the same.'

33.

In his proposals for change within the party, Hobsbawm included a revision of the rules, which would include a return to the pre-1952 rule which gave party members the right and duty to 'take part in the formation of party policy', rather than the rules in place at that time which provided only for the discussion of policy. He also asked for recognition that an overwhelming vote for a decision might be a sign of defective party democracy as well as a sign of unanimity, and requested that the leadership recognise that it may not always be right.

Another contribution, an article by Margot Heinemann, also steered a middle course between radical change and the status quo:

'The highest authority in our Party must always be the delegate Congress. But Congresses cannot meet all the time, and between them united work and action can only go forward with an elected leadership in whom the members have confidence, and whose decisions they carry out to the full.

At the same time, it should be possible to get much more effective and continuous democratic discussion of our Party policy than we have had in the past.' 34.

Margot Heinemann suggested that two types of major issue should be distinguished: those where an immediate decision is required, and the leadership must therefore immediately decide upon policy which the

membership must operate, for example the Suez crisis; and those important longer-term questions where a decision need not be taken at once, but the issue can be put before the membership, for example the decision to change from factory groups to branches at the end of the war. She also suggested that party Districts could start their own discussion journals to help members develop and express their analyses and theoretical positions. A much more hard hitting critique appeared in the same issue, from Chimen Abramsky, entitled 'We Must Examine Our Past Mistakes':

'John Mahon's article on inner-party democracy...could easily have been written some twenty years ago, as nowhere does it betray the impact of the lessons of the Twentieth Congress.' 35.

Abramsky specifically referred to the party's failure to examine mistakes of past policy:

'Let us take three instances only, and there are many more examples, all limited to internal problems in Britain:

1. Our attitude to the war in 1939;
2. Our advocacy of a coalition with Churchill in 1945; and
3. The dissolution of the factory groups.

On the first, recently Harry Pollitt declared on television that he thinks that his stand in September 1939 was correct...So we should be entitled to know who opposed Pollitt's original line before we began

to oppose the war, and what other factors caused the change. On the other issues, we need to have a full discussion on the influence of the liquidationist ideas of Earl Browder on the leadership of the Party.' 36.

Abramsky said that he had chosen these three examples specifically because they were entirely the party's own decisions, rather than something like the Tito split, over which, he asserted, the British party had no choice. The reason Abramsky felt that no serious post-mortem was made on past mistakes was because it might weaken the leadership. Abramsky's reference to Browderism is an interesting one, and relates the immediate post-war approach of the party to its programme and its changing view of the way in which socialism was to be achieved, (see above Chapter Six), to the developments within the CPUSA in 1944-45.

Browderism, so-called after Earl Browder, the General Secretary of the CPUSA, was the rejection of Marxism-Leninism as an ideology appropriate to American political circumstances, born out of the war-time view that the unity of different classes was necessary to defeat Nazi aggression. From this popular front approach, Browder had gone on to consider that the victory of the allies would herald an era of great and peaceful co-existence, and that the 'imperialists' would end imperialism through developing the colonies as independent states. At home, he predicted an increase in production for the benefit of the people:

'Under such circumstances he saw no need for the Communist Party, and proposed instead a Communist Political Association (CPA). This would be an educational sect which would not be in conflict with the capitalist system. It would eliminate the revolutionary working class forces and dispense with the need for a vanguard party to create a socialist society.' 37.

The CPA was formed in 1944, but a national convention, called in July 1945 reconstituted the Communist Party, and Browder was expelled from the Communist Party in February 1946. The international movement had not been silent on the issue. In April 1945, Jacques Duclos of the French Communist Party published an attack on Browder in 'Cahiers du Communisme', which was reprinted in the American 'Daily Worker' on May 24, 1945:

'Everyone understands that the Communist Party of the United States wants to work to achieve unity in their country. But it is less understandable that they envisage the solution of the problem of national unity with the good will of the men of the trusts, and under quasi-idyllic conditions as if the capitalist regime had been able to change its nature by some unknown miracle.

In truth, nothing justifies the dissolution of the American Communist Party, in our opinion. Browder's analysis of capitalism in the United States is not distinguished by a judicious application of Marxism-Leninism. The predictions regarding a sort of disappearance of class contradictions in the United States correspond in nowise to a Marxist-Leninist understanding of the situation...' 38.

In fact, this was not the first time such an approach had been advocated in the United States. In the late 1920s, the General Secretary, Jay Lovestone, put forward the view that the USA was immune from the operation of capitalist economic laws - that it operated under 'exceptional circumstances', based on the period of prosperity after the immediate post-war crisis. This theory of American exceptionalism was rejected by the US party in 1929, and Lovestone and his followers were expelled.

The Browder events were commented on by Jessica Mitford, a member of the CPUSA until 1958; referring to the Duclos Letter, she remarked:

'This clear signal from the international Communist movement resulted in re-establishment of the Communist Party, USA, rejection of Browder's concept of class harmony for the foreseeable future, a re-affirmation of socialist principles, and a return to the strategy of the United Front as originally conceived in the mid-thirties: 'a coalition of the working class, the toiling farmers, Negroes, and middle classes against capitalist reaction, fascism and war'.

There was much rejoicing in the ranks at this turn of events. Many comrades had had deep reservations about the Browder policies. The returning war veterans - 15,000 Communists had served in the armed forces - had been particularly incensed to discover that in their absence their party had been dissolved.' 39.

Such extreme forms of this approach were not found within the CPGB, but the policies which Abramsky refers to were quite clearly the result of an overly-optimistic view both of the world situation in

general, and the role of social democracy in the transformation to socialism in particular.

Such discussion continued within the Party press until the Special Congress in April, 1957, and also received comment from the non-party press. In January 1957, when the Reports became available as a pamphlet, a review by Edward Crankshaw appeared in 'The Observer', praising the Minority Report in just such a way as to give fuel to the party leadership's inferences that the dissidents were petty-bourgeois individualists:

'A profound and radical indictment of the character and methods of the British Communist Party has been published in London in a minority report of the special commission set up to inquire into inner-party democracy...This report focuses, more sharply than anything that has yet appeared, the deep crisis of the party under the impact of the events of the past year.

It is all the more damaging because the report is written by men in the grip of a crisis of conscience and desperately anxious to save their party from disaster. It is all the more impressive because its 15 pages of human protest contrast so vividly with the bleak, mechanistic, unpersuasive jargon of the majority report...' 40.

The vote on the inner-party democracy debate at the Congress resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Majority Report

Notes:

1. 'Democratic Centralism', Michael Waller, Manchester, 1981, page 4.
2. Ibid., page 12.
3. 'The Communist Party Rules', 1952 edition, clause 12.
4. 'Foundations of Leninism', J.Stalin, in 'Leninism', London, 1940, pages 80-1.
5. Ibid., page 81.
6. Ibid.
7. Report of the Commission on Inner Party Democracy (Minority Report).
8. Ibid., page 53.
9. Ibid., page 59.
10. 'Report on Inner Party Democracy', John Mahon, Special Congress, 1957.
11. Christopher Hill - interview, 1987.

12. 'The Day the Party had to Stop', Malcolm MacEwen, in 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 30.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., page 31.

15. Ibid.

16. Betty Reid - interview, 1988.

17. Ibid.

18. WN, 12 May 1956.

19. WN, 21 July 1956.

20. Ibid.

21. WN, 18 August 1956.

22. Ibid.

23. WN, 1 September 1956.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. WN, 8 September 1956.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. WN, 22 September 1956.

30. Ibid.

31. WN, 6 October 1956.

32. Ibid.

33. WN, 13 October 1956.

34. WN, 27 October 1956.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. 'Highlights of a Fighting History: 60 Years of the CPUSA', Philip Bart (ed.), New York, 1979, page 217.

38. DW(USA), 24 May 1945.

39. 'A Fine Old Conflict', Jessica Mitford, London, 1977, page 61.

40. 'The Observer', 27 January 1957.

Chapter Eight

The Hungarian Uprising

Stalin's death in 1953 had set in train the process of destalinisation in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, one aspect of this process meant a new and greater chance for national self-expression - in effect, the rise of national communism, previously quashed since the expulsion of Tito from the Cominform. Within the Soviet Union itself, the leadership was far from united; there were two different schools of thought, on the one hand Malenkov and Khrushchev who wanted substantial economic reforms and a relaxation of political life, and on the other Molotov and Kaganovitch, who wanted only minor alterations to the whole system. Events as they developed, particularly in Eastern Europe, favoured the reform group. Continued failure to take the desires of the workers into consideration led to increased unrest in some of the satellites. For example, in Czechoslovakia, drastic monetary reform in May 1953 was followed by an immediate drop in living standards, and workers rioted in Ostrava and Pilsen. Two weeks later there were serious riots in East Germany. Walter Ulbricht had rejected suggestions for economic and political relaxation, and indeed had announced that workers' output norms should be raised by 10 percent.

These events helped to ensure that the reformers in the Kremlin gained the upper hand. In August, Malenkov launched the new economic course. Living standards were to be dramatically increased and the

production emphasis to be shifted to consumer goods. The pressure was also applied to the 'little Stalins' of Eastern Europe - leaders like Rakosi of Hungary, Chervenkov of Bulgaria and Gheorghiu Dej of Romania, to reform and loosen up. After the East German events, the Soviets summoned the Hungarian leaders to Moscow and ordered them to change policy; Imre Nagy became Prime Minister, authorised to announce far-reaching political and economic reforms. His credibility was fairly high because he had been dismissed in 1949 for opposing a severe and hasty collectivisation drive.

In Czechoslovakia and Hungary the conservatives fought hard to water down the economic reforms, and chose in particular to fight over the question of agriculture, pressing for further collectivisation. The reformers temporarily won the argument, and collectivisation was halted. In 1955 however, the New Course was defeated in Moscow, and a centrist leadership emerged under Khrushchev, and the switch away from heavy industry was partially reversed. In Hungary, Imre Nagy was replaced.

Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU caused a sensation in Eastern Europe, but only Poland and Hungary were deeply convulsed on a nationwide basis - in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Romania, the conservative leaders squashed reformism within the party before it could spill over onto the streets. In Poland, the movement for change was just contained and diverted into reformist channels after the Soviet Union was persuaded not to use force.

Reporting of the unrest in Poznan in Poland in the summer of 1956, which was featured in the 'Daily Worker', was very much emphasising

the idea that there was a conspiracy, a counter-revolutionary tendency provoked by agents provocateurs backed by external forces and attempting to undermine socialism. Under the headline 'Poznan Workers didn't want the riots', Gordon Cruickshank gave the following report from Prague on the 2nd of July:

'At the great Zispo works here workers told me today of their deep concern and bitter regret that their orderly protest demonstration on Thursday should have turned into a bloodthirsty riot.

One worker told me of thugs armed with pistols and truncheons joining in what began as a peaceful demonstration.

All the workers are, however, still bitter about conditions on the job and assert that their rightful demands have been neglected for too long...Within the last two weeks various forms of limited strike action have been taken, particularly in one shop, the wagon shop W.3. This shop, according to some workers, has been playing a leading and somewhat demagogic agitational role in the movement.

It is said that in W.3. there are a number of individuals who have only been in factory work since the end of the war. Among these are ex-petty criminals and wartime collaborators.' 1.

The editorial of that same day is particularly interesting because it attempts to explain the historical development of the Eastern European countries and rationalise the intensely oppressive Stalinist period of 1948 to 1953, whilst also pinpointing the need to defend nascent socialism from external threat. There was, however, some recognition that the workers may have had genuine grievances:

'...they set up peoples' democratic regimes based on a coalition of the anti-fascist parties and they proceeded to expropriate the capitalists and the landlords. These peoples' democratic regimes, in carrying through the revolution, had to arm themselves with emergency powers.

Now the foundations of a socialist order have been laid, a powerful development of industries has taken place, exceptional educational facilities have been provided, but a period has been reached when the emergency powers are standing in the way of further development.

There must be a growth of Socialist legality...

Those who have watched this hopeful process taking place in Poland have wondered whether the remnant of the historic capitalist and landlord forces would utilise the freer set-up to stage a provocation which would halt the process. For the further the progress along the Socialist democratic way, the more hopeless the outlook for them.

In the Poznan events there appears to have been a convergence of reactionary forces hating Socialism and the discontented workers who, while not desiring to abandon the Socialist road, wanted a remedy of their immediate grievances, which were then under consideration. The strike by itself would have passed off peacefully but for the armed gangs who linked up with it.' 2.

In Hungary, the leaders' response to the Secret Speech was minimal - their policy barely changed. Calls for reform came from intellectuals, particularly from the Petofi Circle, a club for young intellectuals, and from students. The absence of change from the leadership prompted the Soviets themselves to promote

destalinisation, and in July 1956, Suslov and Mikoyan from the Soviet Politburo came to Budapest to ask Rakosi to resign. He was replaced by Ernest Gero who was himself hardly a reformer; he introduced some half-measures - widening Parliament's role and rehabilitating political prisoners, but made no fundamental changes - there was no end made to collectivisation or to the emphasis on heavy industry. In August, 'World News' carried an article entitled, 'Re-establishing Socialist Legality...Further Changes in Hungary', by Lawrence Kirwan, which examined the atmosphere of political relaxation in Hungary:

'The fresh breeze now blowing through the countries building socialism is no better illustrated than in Hungary. Not only have sincere efforts been going on there to set right the results of abuses of power between 1948 and 1953, but at the same time a most vigorous discussion has been shaping the democratic forms to prevent anything like it happening again.' 3.

The article quoted Gyorgy Non, the Chief Attorney, on the reasons that such abuses had occurred. His assessment included the tense international situation after 1948, the theory of the intensification of the class struggle, the cult of the personality, and lack of confidence in people in power. Non's department was responsible for re-examining the prosecutions of the imprisoned former security chief, Gabor Peter. Of 149 cases reopened, 124 were acquitted, 10 were found guilty in lesser degree and 15 were found justly convicted of crimes against the State. In a further series of re-examinations, 456 people were found innocently convicted, the article reported.

One particular factor which the article stressed, was that although safeguards of public liberty were written into the Constitution, paper safeguards were not enough, and there should be adequate and effective democratic institutions to supervise and check that the law was being carried out. The reader was assured that such a process was also being carried out by the Chief Attorney's office, which was being given the task of investigating people's complaints.

Quite clearly, the impression was being given that all was now well in Hungary. With regard to the changes in leadership, Rakosi was referred to in the following way:

'Though Rakosi stepped down from the Party leadership he was not disgraced as some newspapers have suggested. He has a proud record as a working class fighter since the first world war. His beliefs and activities cost him 16 years in fascist prisons between the war years.

But he had to take responsibility for the wrongs that occurred during his leadership after 1948, and he felt that the Party would tackle the big clearing-up job better if he stepped out of the picture.' 4.

However, the new leader Erno Gero was given the last word in assuring the reader that the Hungarians were not changing their social system - only altering its methods of working:

'This new State, our people's democratic State, with all its merits and faults, is our State, which we would not change for any kind of

bourgeois state! And we shall put right the faults which are in it, led by our Party!' 5.

Notwithstanding this kind of optimistic portrayal of the future of socialism in Hungary, over the next three months, popular pressure for reform increased, and demands grew for a full funeral for Laszlo Rajk, who had been posthumously rehabilitated in April 1956. In October, Gero gave in and allowed a funeral, a huge march through Budapest led by Nagy and Rajk's widow. On the 22nd October, the writers of the Petofi Circle announced a list of moderate socialist demands, including international relations on the basis of equality, wage reforms and worker management, the reform of agriculture, a secret ballot, the elimination of the Rakosi clique, and the restoration of Nagy to the leadership. Demands were also drawn up by the students which were much more far-reaching, but also demanded Nagy as leader:

'Hungary: call for Nagy'

The return to power of Mr Imre Nagy, former Hungarian premier, rehabilitated last August, was demanded by a meeting of Budapest students yesterday.

Budapest Radio reported that they expressed brotherly sympathy with their Polish comrades in their fight for sovereignty and liberalisation. The meeting...came a few hours after 'Szabad Nep', the Hungarian Communist Party paper had stated that Hungary must map her own road to Socialism.

'The Soviet, Polish, Yugoslav or Chinese roads to Socialism do not

absolve us from mapping out a Hungarian road', the paper said.

To make Lenin's ideas triumph in Hungary means to precede every Party and Government decision by a minute analysis of Hungarian conditions.' 6.

These events in Hungary coincided with yet more developments in Poland, and the accession to power of Wladislaw Gomulka, the popular nationalist communist leader. On the 22nd of October, the 'Daily Worker' reported 'Poland's Fateful Weekend':

'From a weekend of historic events in Poland the following facts emerged yesterday:

1. The country is being swept by a mass movement demanding two things above all: democratisation of all aspects of life and friendship on equal terms with the Soviet Union...' 7.

The editorial, entitled 'Poland faces the future', attempted to deal with the question of nationalism and anti-Sovietism which was arising in Eastern Europe:

'...To tolerate the revival of the traditional anti-Russianism in Poland is, therefore, to betray the vital interests of the Polish people. It is not sufficient for the Polish leadership to denounce it. It is essential that it combats anti-Soviet trends and that it seeks a complete understanding with the Soviet Union without delay. The problems of the various Socialist States are never quite the same. They may advance at different speeds to their goal, but they

must continue to co-operate.

In a world where monopoly capitalism is still strong, unity is essential to victorious, all-round advance.' 8.

On the 23rd of October in Hungary, a mass rally was held to express solidarity with Poland and its new leadership under the reformer Gomulka, which was the real turning point in Hungarian events.

'Szabad Nep' had, however, already begun to take a harder line against the dissidents than its statement on Polish events would have led one to expect:

'A warning against 'nationalist provocateurs' who want a bourgeois rising in Hungary was printed yesterday by 'Szabad Nep', Hungary's leading newspaper...describing the meeting, (it) told the students that they must not let their demonstrations become counter-revolutionary in character'. 9.

Thousands of people met in Budapest, and then failed to disperse. In the evening an emergency Central Committee meeting was held, and Nagy was called back as Prime Minister, with Gero remaining as party first secretary. A secret message was sent, quite probably by Gero, to the Soviet leadership asking for help from the Soviet garrison to intervene to restore order. The arrival of the tanks served only to inflame the crowds further, and street fighting broke out. Total confusion ensued, with a vacuum of effective leadership.

Revolutionary committees were set up in several parts of the country and factories were taken over by workers' councils, encouraged by the

trade union leaderships and sanctioned by the Central Committee of the Party.

Nagy approached former social democrat and peasant leaders, wishing to maintain a socialist economy within the framework of a multiparty coalition. With some kind of peaceful settlement being developed, the Soviet troops began to withdraw from Budapest. But a moderate solution now seemed no longer to be on the cards; voices now called for complete independence outside the Warsaw Pact. Nagy agreed and neutrality was proclaimed. This step provoked the second Soviet intervention. On the 4th of November, Soviet tanks once again entered Budapest and ended the revolt, although two or three of the biggest factories held out for several days, and hundreds of people died in the street fighting. Kadar was installed by the Soviet leadership as the new leader of Hungary, and after a short period of clampdown, began a long process of reform and liberalisation in Hungary.

From the perspective of the British Party, the events in Hungary added yet one more crisis to the trauma-ridden organisation. Was this a revolution or a counter-revolution? Was one intervention acceptable and the other one not? What was the role of the west, of Radio Free Europe, the CIA and Cardinal Mindszenty? These questions and the inadequate responses of the British Communist Party leadership led to yet more arguments and recriminations, and an even greater loss of membership.

Coverage of these events in the 'Daily Worker' continued to be based largely on official statements from Hungary, which highlighted the role of counter-revolutionary forces, although from time to time the

Hungarian Party leadership was taken to task for its failure to pay sufficient attention to the democratic rights and living standards of the working class. The intervention of the Soviet troops was referred to in the first instance almost in passing:

'Workers in Budapest factories yesterday formed armed groups to protect the factories and the country against counter-revolutionary formations that had attacked buildings, murdered civilians and tried to start a civil war. "Workers! Defend your factories and machines", called the newly-appointed Prime Minister, Imre Nagy, in a broadcast appeal to the nation...While these appeals were being made, armed formations of counter-revolutionaries, supported by hooligan gangs, were fighting against Soviet and Hungarian troops on the streets. The Soviet troops were asked to intervene on Tuesday night soon after a peaceful demonstration of students had been turned into a series of riots and armed raids on shops, factories and key buildings. The government said the Soviet troops would return to their barracks when order was restored. The youth demonstration of Tuesday night had been changed into a counter-revolutionary provocation and gangs had endangered order and the life of citizens, said an official statement.' 10.

The editorial of the same day announced that the Hungarian working class had rallied round the Government and Party:

'Counter-revolution in Hungary staged an uprising in the hours of darkness on Tuesday night. The Hungarian working class rallied around

its Government and Party and smashed this attempt to put the clock back.' 11.

News coverage on October 26th indicated that the Nagy leadership had learnt the lessons of the 'tragic events', and spelt out a variety of promises that the government had made:

1. Discussions would be held with the Soviet Union, with regard to putting the relationship between the two countries strictly on a footing of full equality.
2. Negotiations on the withdrawal of Soviet troops would be held after order had been restored.
3. There would be no revenge mentality towards the rioters.
4. Gero would be replaced by Kadar as secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party.

The editorial also quoted a 'Daily Telegraph' article as further evidence that the counter-revolutionary efforts were organised and prepared well ahead:

'What must, for the moment, remain a mystery, is how these bold but harmless student demonstrations developed into a major armed revolt, and where the arms came from. The fact that resistance by armed troops flared up simultaneously at so many points suggests that the movement was organised, if only loosely.' 12.

The headlines of the 27th of October declared the imminent announcement of Nagy's new government, which would be founded on a 'broad popular basis, including trade union representatives'.

Reference was made to the demands put forward by the trade unions, which included workers' councils in every factory to establish 'workers management' and 'radically transform' the system of state central planning and directing. On the 29th of October, the 'Daily Worker' editorial informed the readers that events had clearly constituted a counter-revolutionary bid, but recognised that the reticence of the Party and the government in putting right the economic and political wrongs had contributed to the disastrous situation. Because of this reticence, it stated, 'some sections of the people joined in the fight against the Government'. These sections were, the editorial considered, being used by reactionary elements, although the government was attempting to make a distinction between the two:

'The Hungarian Government has made a clear distinction between the reactionary elements and those who are being used by them. It has been endeavouring to defeat the counter-revolution not only by repelling the military attacks but also by broadening the Government and accepting what it regards as just demands from the people.' 13.

Two other interesting items were also carried; firstly a report of the view of 'Pravda', which put the blame for the events on 'western subversion', and secondly an appeal from the editor to raise money to help pay for accurate reporting from Budapest. The intention was to send 'Daily Worker' journalist Peter Fryer to Hungary. As J.R. Campbell put it:

'Daily Worker' readers know Fryer's reputation as an experienced and skilled reporter. No-one is better qualified for such an assignment.'

14.

Peter Fryer had covered Laszlo Rajk's trial in 1949, and had had no doubts about the sincerity of Rajk's confession. When Rajk was posthumously rehabilitated in 1956, Fryer began to ask questions:

'Walter Holmes, 'Daily Worker' copytaster, at first spiked news of this rehabilitation. Challenged by some of his colleagues, he snapped: 'Who the hell cares about Rajk?'

Well, I did, for one - had I not helped send him to his death?

...In Budapest in the summer of that pivotal year, I had a long conversation with fellow journalist Miklos Gimes. He told me of growing discontent in Hungary, of increasingly clamorous demand for Rajk's murderers to be put on trial.'

15.

Fryer decided to resign from the 'Daily Worker', and was actually working out his notice when he was sent to cover the Hungarian uprising. Most of the material that he sent back from Hungary was subsequently suppressed by the editor.

The following day's paper carried the reply of 'Szabad Nep', the Hungarian Party paper to the 'Pravda' dispatch which had been headed 'Collapse of the anti-people adventure in Hungary'. 'Szabad Nep' replied in no uncertain terms that this attitude by 'Pravda' was a mistake:

'The revolutionary people of Pest and Buda want freedom, people's freedom, a life without despotism, terror and fear, more bread and national independence. Would this be 'anti-people adventure'?' 16.

From the 31st of October, Hungary slipped from the headline position, as the Suez crisis came to dominate the news, although the formation of Nagy's new coalition government of all democratic parties was announced, as well as the intention to hold a general election at an early stage. Nagy also made a statement to the effect that he had known nothing about the decision to call in Soviet troops or the declaration of military law. Those decisions, he stated, had been made by Erno Gero and Andras Hegedus, who would be called to account for these actions.

Under the headline 'Slaughter in Budapest', the paper of the following day carried sensational news:

'Soviet troops and tanks yesterday completed their withdrawal from Budapest - then gangs of reactionaries began beating Communists to death in the streets.

Some reports claimed that only identified representatives of the former security police were being killed, but in fact the gangs seemed to be attacking any Communist they could.' 17.

That particular article also reported that Nagy had told the crowds in Kossuth Square that he would begin negotiations for Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. This was ultimately to be used as one of the justifications for the second intervention - that Nagy was

taking Hungary out of the socialist camp and into the arms of the west.

The first coverage in 'World News' appeared on the 3rd of November, under the title 'Events: Poland and Hungary'. The coverage of Polish events referred to Gomulka's assessment of the economic position in Poland:

'..in the course of his speech (Gomulka) criticised the economic conditions in the country, referring to state and collective farms often not doing as well as individual farms. He described the housing situation as 'alarming', said that the Poznan demonstration was not due to foreign agents, but to a loss of confidence in the Government and that the causes lie in 'ourselves and our leadership'.' 18.

The article also referred to the stronger line that Gomulka had to take against demonstrations specifically focussed around political slogans:

'However...reaction was now beginning to rear its head, to come forward more openly. A whole series of demonstrations were being held...in which openly reactionary slogans were used. 'National Sovereignty' became 'Rokossovsky to Siberia' and 'Tell the truth about the Katyn Murders', 'Freedom and Democratisation' were turned into a demand for freedom for reaction...

'Trybuna Ludu' attacked these slogans, saying they were 'an irresponsible outburst smelling of nationalist and anti-Soviet

demagogy'. Gomulka followed with a call for a 'firm stand against attempts at provocation'.' 19.

The coverage of Hungarian events had a similar approach: that there was a mixture of sincere desire for changes, combined with 'the voice of Hungarian reaction':

'Overnight, on Tuesday, 23 October, the demonstrations with just democratic demands were joined by counter-revolutionary elements with other aims...In the course of the night, Nagy became Prime Minister...Nagy called on the workers to defend the factories and on the two million trade unionists "to prevent destruction in the factories and not listen to provocation". He then called on the Soviet troops to assist in the necessary task of checking the rioters and armed raiders and help to restore order, saying that when this was achieved they would be withdrawn. He stated that peaceful demonstrations had been joined by hostile elements.' 20.

By the 28th of October, 'World News' reported, Soviet troops were being withdrawn from Budapest and Nagy had announced a far-reaching programme on economic demands, an amnesty for all involved in the fighting, workers' councils, a new police force, and negotiations with the Soviet Union about withdrawal of all Soviet troops, and that the basis of the relationship between the two countries should be one of strict equality and independence. What political conclusions did the article suggest should be drawn from these events? Firstly, that the Government should have moved more swiftly to right the wrongs

facing the workers - the low living standards and so on. Had it done so, the article argued, 'the people would have rallied more firmly around their Government and the work of reaction would thus have been made much more difficult'.

Secondly, the government underestimated the forces of international reaction:

'...in their correct desire to carry out steps to develop democracy and correct the errors and injustices of the past, there was a tendency to forget the strength of international reactionary forces, which were well organised. The 'Daily Mail' correspondent, Noel Barber, wrote on 25 October, that he had dined in Budapest with the leaders of the Hungarian counter-revolution 'who for a year plotted this week's revolt'.' 21.

Reference was also made to the effects of the cold war on Poland and Hungary, and of the economic difficulties caused by the Korean war:

'A tremendous strain was put on the economic resources of all the countries of Socialism as a result of the cold war and aggressive policies pursued by the imperialist powers. Since 1945, the Soviet Union has poured out great quantities of its production and material resources to help the various socialist countries.

As a result, the Party was divided and weakened from within, and reaction seized its opportunity...

The Parties in Poland and Hungary had, and still have, difficult tasks. It is necessary to beware of conservatism, refusal to initiate

changes; but in making changes it is essential to be on guard against opening the way for reaction.' 22.

'World News' of the 10th of November published two items on Hungary, first 'The New Hungarian Government's Appeal to the People', and secondly the text of a statement issued by the Executive Committee of the CPGB on the 4th of November.

The Appeal to the People set out the programme of the new government, and explained why, although the initial uprising had been a just one, it had been necessary to take such a step as overthrowing the Nagy government:

'On 23 October in our country a mass movement started, of which the just aims were the correction of faults committed against the Party and against the people...

The weakness of the Government of Imre Nagy and the growing influence of counter-revolutionary elements who insinuated themselves into the movement, put in danger our socialist gains, our people's state, our workers' and peasants' power, and the very existence of our country.'

23.

The EC statement made clear its complete support both of Kadar's new government, and of the second Soviet intervention. The broadcast by Cardinal Mindszenty was seen as the signal that the forces of counter-revolution were on the point of seizing power:

'Coming after the murder and lynching of Communists, the open hostility of the Nagy Government to the Soviet Union, and the repeated concessions which it made to the reactionary forces, Cardinal Mindszenty's broadcast was the warning to all Hungarian patriots that the danger of fascism and Western intervention was acute.

For Mindszenty attacked even the Nagy Government and called for a more reactionary regime.' 24.

The best elements, so-called, of the working class took heed of this warning, and under the leadership of Janos Kadar, first secretary of the party, left the Nagy government and formed a new government. This new government, whilst being opposed to the wrong policies pursued by the party under Rakosi and Gero and pledged to put right the mistakes and correct the errors of those years, was also committed to the defence of the socialist and democratic system as developed since 1945. The choice had been clear - the defence of socialism or the restoration of capitalism and fascism, and Soviet assistance had been necessary to ensure that the former was achieved:

'In the critical situation existing in Hungary, with the forces of counter-revolution on the offensive, with agents and emigres pouring in across the western frontier, and with many of the police and soldiers loyal to the cause of socialism having been slaughtered by reaction, the new Government called on the Soviet forces stationed in Hungary under the Warsaw Pact for assistance in preventing the victory of the counter-revolution.

What would the advent of a fascist Hungary have meant? It would have meant a bastion of Western imperialism and reaction in the heart of Europe; an ally of Adenauer Germany and its Nazi militarist forces; a spear thrust into the midst of the socialist states of Eastern Europe; a hotbed of future war.' 25.

The EC felt that the Soviet forces had taken the right decision in helping the Hungarian Communists and Socialists to prevent a return to fascism. The Soviet Union, it considered, were not only helping to defend socialism in Hungary, but also peace and the interests of the world working class. On this basis, the EC held the view that the new Hungarian government, and the actions of the Soviet forces should be supported by Communists and Socialist everywhere.

Thus the EC did not see the Soviet intervention as an infringement of another country's sovereignty; rather, it saw it as a fraternal defence of a family member under threat from hostile, external forces. Although this view was rejected by some - Saville and Thompson, for example, this view was widely accepted by many party members. With what evidence were they presented, to back up this position?

In 'World News' of the 17 November, 'Hungary - A Guide to Recent Events' put forward an explanation of how this situation had arisen. During the Cold War, it was argued, it became clear to the western capitalists that overwhelming support was being given by the Hungarian people to the Communist Party. This led the western powers, particularly the USA, to make long term plans to undermine the Communists' position, with a view to an eventual restoration of

capitalism. To this end, a variety of underground organisations were formed within Hungary, and a particularly militant, US directed organisation called 'Operation X' was to undertake subversive activities in the Eastern European countries:

'Under this plan (Operation X), strong arm-squads would be formed under American guidance. Assassination of key Communists would be encouraged. American agents, parachuted into Eastern Europe...would be used to co-ordinate anti-Communist action. Volunteers for such work, many of them veterans of the undergrounds of World War II, already are turning up in Washington to look for jobs.'

(U.S. News and World Report, 9 April 1948)' 26.

The article also quoted a variety of other US news reports about recruitment for such activities, as well as details of various US Government Acts:

'The Mutual Security Act

This Act was adopted by the United States Government on 10 October 1951. Under it, the Mutual Security Agency was set up which, according to the official wording of the Act, was provided with \$100 million to finance:

'selected persons who are resident or escapees from the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania or Albania, either to form such persons into elements of the military forces supporting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or for other purposes.'" 27.

Reference was also made to organisations of emigres such as The National Committee for a Free Europe, and its branch the Free Europe College, near Strasbourg in France:

'Selected men and women emigres from the people's democracies are given special courses at this college.

'The student must undertake to return to his native country as soon as circumstances permit. He is being trained as a member of the new elite that will take over the people's democracies upon their 'liberation'.'

(Manchester Guardian, 1 December 1951)' 28.

Of particular interest are the events concerning Peter Fryer, the 'Daily Worker' journalist mentioned above, who was sent to Hungary to ensure more accurate and detailed reporting for the paper. Most of his material was never published by the 'Daily Worker', because his coverage of the uprising supported the insurgents - both communists and non-communists. Fryer wrote his own recollections of the events immediately after their occurrence, and also spoke of the attitude within the party leadership to criticism of the governments of Eastern Europe, which resulted in the suppression of his material:

'I know a former Communist - he eventually left the Party in disgust - who was appalled by what he found during a lengthy stay in Eastern Europe as a journalist. On his return to Britain he went to see Harry Pollitt, then general secretary of the Communist Party, and told him everything that had distressed him. Pollitt's reply was: 'My advice

to you is to keep your mouth shut'...The 'Daily Worker' sent me to Hungary, then suppressed what I wrote. Much of what I wrote was concealed even from my colleagues.' 29.

In 'Hungarian Tragedy', Fryer argues the case that the revolution was not a counter-revolution but a genuine upsurge by the great majority of the population. There were, he felt, those who would accept that view and would deplore the first Soviet intervention, but would 'defend the second Soviet intervention as a regrettable, but bitter, necessity.' Three arguments were put forward to support this position:

'In the first place it is said that the Nagy government as reconstituted on Saturday, November 3, had moved considerably to the Right, and was on the point of sliding still further to the Right, since it included people who wanted not merely to neutralise Hungary but to restore capitalism and landlordism. Secondly, it is held that a growing danger of counter-revolution, the increasing activity of reactionary forces throughout the country, which the Nagy government was powerless to check, made Soviet intervention imperative...Thirdly, the defenders of the second Soviet intervention claim that White Terror was raging in the country, and that prompt action by Soviet troops was needed to save the lives of Communists.'

30.

Fryer attempted to refute each of these arguments. The first revolved around the character of the Nagy government, which was composed of

two Socialist Workers' (Communist) Party representatives, three each from the Social-Democratic Party and the Smallholders' Party, two from the National Peasant Party and one from the revolutionary committees. Such a people's front government, Fryer argued, could not be branded as enemies of socialism. He quoted, for example, Bela Kovacs of the Smallholders' Party who stated on 31 October:

'No one must dream of going back to the world of counts, bankers and capitalists: that world is over once and for all. A true member of the Smallholders' Party cannot think along the lines of 1939 or 1945.' 31.

He also quoted Ferenc Farkas, a representative of the National Peasant Party in the Nagy government - a party which the 'Daily Worker' described on 5 November as 'semi-fascist' - as saying:

'The Government will retain from the Socialist achievements everything which can be, and must be, used in a free, democratic and Socialist country, in accordance with the wish of the people. We want to retain the most sincere and warmest friendly economic and cultural relations with every Socialist country, even when we have achieved neutrality. We also want to establish economic and cultural relations with the other peace-loving countries of the world.' 32.

Fryer argued that the demand for neutrality did not signify a slide to the Right, nor open hostility to the Soviet Union, as had been asserted in the statement of the Executive Committee of the CPGB. In

fact he held the view that it was only such a coalition government which would be capable of dealing with the groups of fascists and hooligans who were appearing amongst the insurgents, and being thoroughly condemned by them.

The second argument was as to whether there were reactionary forces active, and whether or not there was a danger of counter-revolution. Fryer agreed that there was a danger of counter-revolution, but had full confidence in the will of the Hungarian people not to return to capitalism. He quoted Bruce Renton from 'The New Statesman and Nation' on November 17:

'Nobody who was in Hungary during the revolution could escape the overwhelming impression that the Hungarian people had no desire or intention to return to the capitalist system.' 33.

It was the people, Fryer argued, who wished to retain socialism, who had the arms in their hands. The broadcast of Cardinal Mindszenty was widely used as evidence of the counter-revolutionary nature of the uprising, and of this Fryer had the following to say:

'As for the Mindszenty broadcast of November 3, the lengthy extracts quoted by Mervyn Jones in 'Tribune' (November 30) make nonsense of Andrew Rothstein's claim that it 'issued a programme of capitalist restoration', and John Gollan's description of it as 'the virtual signal for the counter-revolutionary coup'. Mindszenty on the whole supported the Nagy Government, and his one reference to private ownership came in a sentence beginning: 'We want a classless

society'! As Jones said, the speech was: 'reminiscent...of a Labour Party policy statement'. 34.

Regarding the final argument - that the Soviet Union stepped in to put a stop to the White Terror raging in Hungary - Fryer asserted that perhaps in the region of twenty to fifty innocent Communists were murdered; a figure that he did not consider to merit either the term White Terror or a Soviet military intervention. Most of those lynched, he claimed, were from the hated secret police, the A.V.H., a view backed up by Bruce Renton:

'In the provinces only the A.V.H. was physically attacked...I had seen no counter-revolutionaries. I had seen the political prisoners liberated...I had seen the executioners executed in the fury of the people's revenge...But there was no 'White Terror'. The Communists walked free, the secret police were hanging by their boots. Where then was this counter-revolution, this White Terror?' 35.

The arguments in favour of the second Soviet intervention, Fryer considered, did not hold water. He further concluded that even if counter-revolution had succeeded and White Terror had been raging, the Soviet Union, from the standpoint of socialist principle would not have been justified in intervening. This principle was violated:

'November 4, 1956, saw the leaders of the Soviet Union defy Lenin's warning never to 'slide, even in trifles, into imperialist relations with the oppressed nationalities, thereby undermining our whole

principle of sincerity, our principle of defence of the struggle against imperialism.' 36.

When Fryer returned from Hungary he resigned from the 'Daily Worker' in protest at the censorship of his material. The editor, Campbell, refused to publish his resignation letter, and so Fryer sent it to the 'Manchester Guardian':

'For the crime of attacking the CP in the capitalist press I was suspended from party membership and threatened with expulsion if I didn't shut up. I defied this threat, wrote a little book called 'Hungarian Tragedy' and was duly expelled, after 14 years, from the party I had lived for and loved.' 37.

Following the publication of 'Hungarian Tragedy' in December 1956, the 'Daily Worker' published 'Eye-Witness in Hungary', a collection of the articles written for the 'Daily Worker' by Charlie Coutts, a party member who worked in Budapest and covered the events for the paper. J.R. Campbell wrote the introduction to the pamphlet, giving a very clear political line on the interpretation of events:

'I believe that they (the articles) will suggest to most politically minded readers that there was a strong element of counter-revolution in the mass movement right from the start.

Organised groups soon appeared who not only knew where to get arms and transport but also where to direct their attacks against Party and State institutions...

The most favourable result that could have accrued (given the non-intervention of the Soviets) would have been a prolonged civil war, in which Western inspired counter-revolution would have received still more massive assistance from outside, in order to further tip the balance against the working class. In that situation a slide to World War III was inevitable.' 38.

J.R. Campbell was clearly of the view that it had been the responsibility of the Soviet Union to take the action that it had - if it had not it would have reneged on its responsibility to the international working class. The responsibility, Campbell argued, of the working class movement with regard to Hungary at that time, was to encourage the closest possible co-operation between the Kadar government and the Hungarian people, and not to support any kind of policy of non-co-operation.

'World News' readers expressed a variety of views on the issue. S. Cole of Cheetham expressed full support of the Hungarian people in their struggle for 'real democratisation against the bureaucracy of certain Party officials', 24 November 1956), but also considered that the Soviet Union was right to take the action that it did:

'Is it not fair to expect, when the U.S. has been spending umpteen millions of dollars on spying, active sabotage and preparations for the overthrow of the people's governments of the Eastern democracies, that these governments, being members of the Warsaw Pact, should ask a friendly socialist power to assist in putting down these attempts of the West?' 39.

'Therefore', concluded Cole, 'I say thank God for the Soviet Union.'

Peggotty Freeman and Ralph Russell asserted that there was wide recognition within the Communist Party that the EC statement on Hungary had been disastrous. It only served to confirm, in their eyes, the view of the British Labour movement that the Party was for the Soviet Union 'right or wrong'.

M.A. Jones from Bristol asked two questions:

'Firstly, was a fascist dictatorship well nigh inevitable had not Soviet forces intervened? Secondly, is the Soviet Union justified in intervening in Hungary's internal affairs in any circumstances?' 40.

Jones considered it true that powerful reactionary forces, supported from abroad, were making considerable headway in Hungary, but that also a leading part in the upheaval had been played by progressive forces, including many party members. Provisional committees had been set up in parts of Hungary, which were negotiating with the Nagy government to secure guarantees for popular demands.

'The situation was a difficult one, and the fate of socialist Hungary was in the balance. However, I would sooner have put my trust in the Hungarian working people's organisations than Soviet armour...

Soviet intervention has split and disrupted Hungarian progressive and socialist groupings, strengthened the hand of the reactionary underground movement...Abroad, the USSR has been discredited in the eyes of Labour and progressive people, and the armed intervention has

spread dismay and confusion through the ranks of world Communist Parties.' 41.

Jones had in many ways hit upon the key points of an assessment of the situation in Hungary and the Communist Party's response to it. The situation was an intensely complex one, and both 'sides' of the argument around it tended to portray it in more cut and dried terms than it actually merited. The CPGB leadership sought to justify the actions of the Soviet Union and so concentrated unduly on the possibilities of counter-revolution. In rejecting this position, Peter Fryer tended to play down the role of anti-communist and anti-socialist forces, and the existence of external factors in the equation. Attempts at destabilisation by western forces, and in particular by the United States, were undoubted, although it is clear that real help when it could have tipped the balance was not forthcoming. The United States was clearly not prepared to go to war with the Soviet Union for the sake of Hungary.

Yet if Peter Fryer tended to idealise the forces in the uprising, and minimise the extent of the anti-communist backlash, nevertheless his fundamental premise was the correct one: the Soviet Union should not have attempted to determine the future of an independent country through military methods - an approach which has only been recognised as correct by the CPSU post-Afghanistan and under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. The CPGB leadership did not see the issue in at all the same terms as critics of the intervention. For the Executive Committee the position was much as Campbell had outlined it in his introduction to Coutts' pamphlet. The Soviet intervention was not a

case of foreign military aggression - it was a question of keeping the socialist house in order: it was, when all was said and done, within the family of socialist nations.

Once again the CPGB leadership and its critics were talking different languages. As in the case of 'The Reasoner' and the discussions with Saville and Thompson over the reasons for its publication, there was a fundamental difference in analysis and principle, which made a common perspective virtually impossible.

That there was a sharp division within the party over policy on Hungary was clear, although its extent is hard to quantify. A report in 'World News' on the 22nd of December gave a break-down of figures for meetings where votes had been taken for and against the Executive Committee statement of the 4th of November. The total votes for the statement were 3,582, with 1,080 against, and 414 abstentions. 42. This clearly constituted a large majority for the Executive Committee position, but was also only a small fragment of party opinion.

Notes:

1. DW, 2 July 1956.

2. Ibid.

3. WN, 25 August 1956.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. DW, 23 October 1956, 2nd edition.

7. DW, 22 October 1956.

8. Ibid.

9. DW, 24 October 1956.

10. DW, 25 October 1956.

11. Ibid.

12. DW, 26 October 1956.

13. DW, 29 October 1956.

14. Ibid.

15. 'Addressing a Brutal History', Peter Fryer, in 'Socialist', 20 November 1991, page 7.

16. DW, 30 October 1956.

17. DW, 1 November 1956.

18. WN, 3 November 1956.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. WN, 10 November 1956.

24. Executive Committee Statement of 4th November, published in WN, 10 November 1956.

25. Ibid.

26. WN, 17 November 1956.

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. 'Hungarian Tragedy', Peter Fryer, London, 1986, page 11.
30. Ibid., page 62.
31. Ibid., page 63.
32. Ibid., page 64.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., page 65.
35. Ibid., page 68.
36. Ibid.
37. 'Socialist', 20 November 1991, page 7.
38. 'Eye-Witness in Hungary', Charlie Coutts, London, 1957, page 3.
39. WN, 24 November 1956.
40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. WN, 22 December 1956.

Chapter Nine

The Recognition of the Crisis and the Special National Congress, 1957

After months of attempted 'business as usual', the Executive Committee finally announced, from its meeting on the 10th and 11th of November, that it would convene a Special National Congress of the party in the April of the following year. This would replace the National Conference which had been planned for the 2nd and 3rd of March. Even at this point, the statement made a show of calling for the Congress in the first instance on the basis of more general political necessities, and only secondarily because of problems within the party itself:

'The Executive Committee decided to convene a special National Congress because it has become clear that such a Congress is necessary in order to strengthen the Party's fight for the defeat of the Tories, the unity of the Labour movement and the defence of peace.

It is necessary also in order to give the membership of the Party the opportunity to pronounce decisively on the various tendencies towards diminishing the role of the Party or weakening its organisational principles which are showing themselves, and to take the necessary decisions to strengthen the fight to build the Party, the Young Communist League and the circulation of the 'Daily Worker'.' 1.

The provisional agenda for the Congress was to include:

1. The political report on behalf of the Executive Committee
2. The British Road to Socialism
3. Inner-Party Democracy
4. The Election of the Executive Committee and the Appeals Committee.

The statement concluded by urging all party members to participate as fully as possible in the pre-Congress discussions. Through this process, the EC was confident that unity in the Party could be cemented on the basis of conviction, and that the Party could go forward strengthened to carry on activity on behalf of the British people.

A much clearer signal of the level of the crisis was published the following week. 'World News' carried what amounted, in party speak, to a desperate plea from the Political Committee, entitled 'Rally Round the Party', which was issued as a statement by the Political Committee on the 15th of November:

'The enemies of the working class and the millionaire press are at the present time directing a ferocious attack against the Communist Party. They are not doing so out of concern for the British workers, the Hungarian workers, the Egyptian workers, or the ordinary people anywhere in the world.

They are attacking the Communist Party because they see in it the most active fighters in the interests of the working class and of socialism.' 2.

The statement went on to catalogue the record of the Communist Party in industrial battles and rent strikes, in fighting for Labour unity and against Toryism, and in leading the opposition to Anglo-French aggression in Suez. In addition, the statement pointed out, the Party was telling the truth about the plans of fascists and counter-revolutionaries both inside and outside Hungary, who were being supported by the 'British millionaire press lords' who were trying to take advantage of the just demands of the Hungarian people to restore fascism in Hungary.

The statement also referred to those members who had resigned from the party during that period, but noted that the great majority of members were 'standing firm'. The suggestion of the Political Committee was that those who were resigning from the party were giving hope and cheer to the class enemy:

'We believe that those who have resigned are profoundly mistaken in the action they have taken, and as events unfold, that many of them will deeply regret that they took this step, instead of remaining members and placing their points of view before their Party organisations.

Of course such resignations are being received with great joy by the Tories and the traditional enemies of the working class. But those who think that the result will be to cripple our Party are making the greatest mistake of their lives.' 3.

The statement also asserted that the Party membership, at membership meetings throughout the country, was declaring in free and open votes

its overwhelming support for the policies of the Executive Committee. Without doubt, strong views were expressed by party members against those who did not 'stand firm' behind the party and its leadership, and there were those who held the view that those who questioned the party line were intellectuals who were out of touch with the working class. One miner from Wigan, J. Dowel, had the following to say on this theme:

'To those comrades who advocate the disbanding of the Party, I say quite frankly, get out of your armchairs, stop this so-called analysing of the necessity of our Party, and drop down off your intellectual ladders, get amongst the working class if it isn't too undignified for you, and you will really learn whether the Party is necessary or not.' 4.

Dowel considered that the party should make more effort to influence the Labour Party and trade union movement with Marxist ideas, and help create unity of the working class and remove 'the festering sore of right-wing control.' 5.

Another controversy arose in early December over the question of what were perceived as political 'platforms', and the right or otherwise of party members to publish material at odds with party policy in the bourgeois press. The question was raised in a theoretical sense by E.J.Hobsbawm in a letter in 'World News' on 1 December, where he referred to Lenin's approach to democratic centralism in times of

inner-party crisis - that is to say, when there were 'fundamental disagreements on policy':

'In Lenin's views the permission of free discussion meant not only that the Party press published different views, but also (see 'Selected Works', IX, 31) that comrades were entitled to issue 'pamphlet platforms', i.e. to broadcast their views to all Party members directly and not only through their branches. Lenin specifically points out that 'from the point of view of formal democracy' this is, under the circumstances, quite right. But Lenin's view of what was permissible went even further. 'Of course it is quite permissible for various groups to form 'blocs'...This means that Lenin realised that only by such means could proper decisions be taken at a time when the Party was badly divided.' 6.

Hobsbawm went on to argue that there were situations when normal rules should be suspended, and that the party at that time was going through such a critical period that it merited such a suspension.

Arguments like those fell on deaf ears however. 'World News' of the following week published a statement by the Political Committee regarding a letter from Communist Party members published in both 'Tribune' and 'New Statesman', criticising the party's policy on Hungary. It was stated that the letter had been sent to these papers because 'it appears it will not be published in the 'Daily Worker''. 7. The letter had been sent by Christopher Hill on behalf of a number of signatories drawn from the party throughout Britain, and it was this factor which appeared to be the point of contention, rather than its

political content. The Editor of the 'Daily Worker' consulted the Political Committee, who advised him that 'an entirely new principle would be established by the publication of a letter for which signatures had been collected all over the country.' 8.

The Editor advised Hill to liaise with the Political Committee to make some arrangement so that the letter could be printed above the name of an individual member.

Hill responded to this letter stating that as the 'Daily Worker' would not publish the jointly signed letter, he would take steps to get it published elsewhere.

The view of the Political Committee was that publication of the letter itself had not been refused, rather that it:

'...represented a political platform in conflict with the policy of the Party, for which signatures had been collected outside the democratic machinery of the Party...once support for a particular political viewpoint is canvassed throughout the country outside the procedure laid down in the Party rules, a precedent is obviously being set which could give rise to the danger of factionalism. It was this which the Political Committee wished to discuss with the comrades concerned. Instead of agreeing to this discussion the letter was sent to the non-Party press.' 9.

This charge of factionalism was the same that had been levelled against those responsible for 'The Reasoner', and despite the worsening situation within the party, no flexibility with the rules was permitted, and a recognition, as Hobsbawm had suggested, of the

exceptional circumstances in which the party found itself was allowed. Nor was this merely an anxiety about arbitrarily tampering with existing rules - the whole tenor of the Majority Report on Inner Party Democracy, and its backing by the Party leadership, indicated that they had absolutely no intention of altering the rules sufficiently to allow legitimate platforms to arise within the party. Somewhat greater leniency appeared to be shown to the signatories, however, perhaps indicative of the greater tension within the party.

A report of the December meeting of the Executive Committee in 'World News' of the 5th of January 1957, gave the EC position on the members who had signed the controversial letter:

'It (the EC) decided to write to these comrades informing them that such an action was impermissible and would not be tolerated in future, and to draw this to the attention of all Party members.' 10.

The content of the letter itself was actually a very sharp denunciation of both the British Communist leadership and aspects of the international communist movement, referring, amongst other things, to the leadership's support of Soviet intervention in Hungary as 'the latest outcome of this evil past'. The signatories still affirmed, however, their identities as Marxists:

'We feel that the uncritical support given by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party to Soviet action in Hungary is the undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact, and failure by British Communists to think out political for themselves...

The exposure of grave crimes and abuses in the USSR, and the recent revolt of workers and intellectuals against the pseudo-Communist bureaucracies and police systems of Poland and Hungary, have shown that for the past twelve years we have based our political analyses on a false presentation of the facts - not an out-of-date theory, for we still consider the Marxist method to be correct...' 11.

The response to this controversy from other party members often revolved around the question of class consciousness, and the fact that the signatories were generally perceived to be intellectuals. Alistair Wilson from Aberdare suggested that in going to 'Tribune', which carried propaganda aimed at destroying the Communist Party, these members were indulging in anti-communist and anti-working class 'Marxism'. He urged intellectuals to think from a class perspective:

'The intellectuals know as well as the rest of us that humanity needs an organised, democratic, disciplined, Marxist party to fulfil the historic need of man today - world socialism without world war. And yet they are doing something much more shameful than their accusations against the Executive. They are, consciously or unconsciously, trying to make the Party disorganised, undemocratic, undisciplined and un-Marxist.' 12.

The major response to the letter came in 'World News' of 12 January, 1957, in a long article by George Matthews, entitled 'Lessons of a Letter'. Matthews accused the letter of being negative, defeatist and un-Marxist, because it concentrated exclusively on past mistakes, did

not examine all the facts, and was harmful to the party because this wrong approach had led the signatories to flout the party rules and publicly attack the party. Matthews went on to draw up a balance sheet of the previous twelve years, where, he considered, the advances of socialism in Eastern Europe and China, coupled with the colonial liberation struggles, and the working class struggles within Britain itself far-outweighed the negative aspects of the balance sheet. With regard to the actual signatories of the letter, Matthews observed that many of them had given years of good service to the movement, and considered that the leadership should itself take some responsibility for the position that they had arrived at:

'If they have put their names to a letter so redolent of a petty-bourgeois outlook, so remote from a working class approach, so bankrupt of positive content, it is certainly not only their responsibility that they should have arrived at this position. The Party leadership must accept its share of responsibility for not appreciating sufficiently that such comrades have special problems, are subjected to different influences from those which face comrades in the factories, and need special help from the Party.' 13.

The final paragraph of Matthews' letter, entitled 'Intellectuals and the Party' concluded with the view that whilst the party needed the intellectuals, the intellectuals should also recognise that they needed the discipline of the party and its help in combatting petty-bourgeois ideas. Matthews had obviously decided that showing pity for the signatories, combined with a certain amount of self-criticism on

the part of the leadership would be a more effective way of undermining their criticisms than a categorical denunciation - he was almost certainly correct in this decision.

Two weeks later Hill responded to Matthews in the letters page of 'World News'. He drew attention to the fact that Matthews had missed, or chosen to miss, the main point of the letter, and had instead resorted to suggesting that the signatories were either ignoring the achievements of the Soviet Union or attacking the party. The criticism that the letter was actually making, Hill reiterated, was that:

'...the leadership, by failing to face unpleasant facts, and by concentrating exclusively on the achievements of the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe, had left the membership totally unprepared for the revelations of the Twentieth Congress and after; and that they have not helped to clear up the subsequent confusion by any fundamental analysis of the reasons for this one-sided presentation. They criticised Stalin only after Khrushchev had criticised him, and the Rakosi clique only after they had been rejected by the Hungarian people and Party.' 14.

There was an enormous gulf, both in emphasis and understanding between the leadership, and dissidents like Hill, and the leadership did appear to resist looking at certain questions; whether or not this was intentional is a matter for speculation. Asked for his opinion on the handling of these events, George Matthews had the following to say:

'When it came to grappling with the revelations and dealing with them in the party here, in retrospect you can legitimately say that things might have been done better, and might have been done differently in the light of after events. I think it was very difficult for the party leadership here to grapple with the situation and to provide the analytical explanation of what had happened that would answer all the questions that people were asking. I certainly wouldn't like to try and justify everything that was said and done at the time as perfect, but it was an attempt to grapple with an extremely difficult situation by people who were as shocked as anybody by what had happened. People like Pollitt had devoted their entire lives to the communist movement and part of that had been, right from the very beginning, the defence of the Soviet Union. The defence of the Soviet Union was part of the political make-up of that generation, and therefore, at the same time as they were shocked by the revelations, they were also concerned that the reaction to it didn't turn into an anti-Soviet plague on all your houses reaction. I think this helps to explain why the language and presentation of party statements at that time weren't as denunciatory of the Soviet Union as some people would have liked, and as some people engaged in.' 15.

There appears to be no real reason for the behaviour of the leadership other than what is implicit in Matthews' comments - there was no conspiracy or grand plan, simply a group of people who didn't know how to respond, other than in the only way they knew - defend and obey. It appeared impossible to change to any other mode of response.

Discussion continued within the party press for the period up until the party Congress in April, including three special pre-Congress monthly supplements to 'World News', which gave additional space to longer contributions; the debates revolved around the issues as already raised.

The 25th (Special) Congress of the Communist Party
April 19-22, 1957

As John Gollan stated in his opening to the Political Resolution discussion, the Congress was called,

'...arising out of the great discussion in the Party following the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU'. 16.

For those who hoped that the 'great discussion' would lead to great change, the Congress was a serious disappointment. For the leadership, however, the reverse was the case. As stated in the 'Summary for Reporting', produced by the national office to help delegates report back to their branches:

'The Congress was a great success. The level of discussion was of a high order. Overwhelmingly, the Congress defeated all tendencies and proposals whose effect would be to divide, disrupt, paralyse or in other ways lessen the revolutionary role of the Party. Overwhelmingly,

the Congress came to decisions upholding the unity of the Party on the basis of the Socialist principles embodied in Marxism-Leninism.' 17.

The item singled out as of 'first importance', in implementing Congress decisions, was to increase the sales of the 'Daily Worker', which serves to underline the 'business as usual' nature of the Congress Summary.

Attending the Congress, were 547 full delegates and 173 consultative delegates, of which only full delegates could vote. The largest single occupation grouping was engineering of metals, occupying 100 delegates, followed by teachers with 65, miscellaneous with 61, and full-time party workers with 44. Delegates were drawn from a wide-range of back-grounds, including housewives (36) and miners (34), with only a small 4 trade union officials. The AEU was the single largest trade union membership. (Ibid.)

The report was proud of the procedure of the Congress, stating:

'Procedure both before and during the Congress shows the Party to be far more democratic than any other political party in Britain.' 18.

In explaining this claim, the report went on to say:

'a) Before Congress: months of discussion of Congress documents.

Contributions to discussion published in twelve issues of 'World News' in total of 69½ pages and three issues of a special 'Discussion Supplement' with total of 69 pages, making more than 150,000 words; the 2,000 amendments and a great many suggestions and ideas coming

from Branch discussions; the election of delegates by local Party organisations.

b)At the Congress:...Ninety-three spoke from the floor in debate, all speakers having seven minutes except openers and closers of discussions on the main reports, and those giving reports of the Congress Committees. Altogether, some 130 speeches were made.' 19.

The Political Resolution

The Political Report and Resolution, introduced by John Gollan, concentrated on three main areas: the position of Britain, and the tasks of the Communist Party; events since the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU; and the Communist Party itself.

On the political situation within Britain itself, it was recognised that to secure a policy for Britain which would ensure peace, social advance and independence from the USA, it was necessary, through united mass struggle led by the working class, both inside parliament and outside, to secure the election of a Labour majority government, with Communist MPs. On the actual function of the Communist Party within this context:

'But right-wing Labour opposes united working class struggle, and supports the preservation of capitalism;

Therefore the Labour movement cannot secure the basic changes in policy this country needs without the help of the Communist Party,

whose leadership and public activity are indispensable in the development of mass struggle and labour unity.' 20.

Gollan also pre-empted two likely lines of discussion: whether in the interests of unity, Communist electoral work should be lessened; and whether it would not be more constructive for Marxists to influence the Party from within?

On the first point, Gollan stated:

'Why is our electoral position so vital?...Unless we win votes we won't get unity, for one of the key points in developing unity is electoral strength. And for some future closer connection with the Labour Party, such as affiliation, this is also bound up with a growth in electoral strength; to surrender on the electoral front would only bring contempt, not unity.' 21.

In fact the explanation given in the 'Summary for Reporting' was rather different:

'...lessening or giving up public work or electoral activities would not help to win unity but hinder its development. This is because unity comes with working class action: the greater the action, the deeper the unity.' 22.

The response on Marxists transforming the Labour Party from within hinged on the fact that left-wing organisations - like the ILP and the Socialist League - were prevented from effectively functioning within

the Labour Party, by changes brought about by the 'right-wing machine':

'Militant developments within the Labour Party are welcome, but it is illusory to imagine that basic changes in Labour Party policy can be brought about only from within. The key to change is united mass struggle. For this, the public activity of our party is indispensable. To submerge our Party would be to destroy the only instrument capable of helping to effect a change in Labour policy.' 23.

The second major area dealt with was the events since the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. As was to be expected after the debates of the previous twelve months, Gollan introduced this topic in the context of the great achievements of the Soviet Union, and of the building of socialism since the Second World War, and stressed that the problems had been overcome:

'It was on this tremendous positive background that the Congress carried forward the correction of the errors and distortions of the later years of Stalin's life, and the crimes to which they gave rise.' 24.

Gollan pulled no punches in referring to a 'wave of revisionism' which had arisen internationally, an approach which he considered to be a distortion of the lessons of the Twentieth Congress:

'The main revisionist ideas have been the same everywhere - belittling the leading role of the Party, attacking the principles of Marxism-Leninism, democratic centralism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, questioning whether the Soviet Union is a socialist state, seeing nothing but crimes in the last twelve years. Our Executive Committee has rejected these revisionist ideas and calls upon Congress to do so. We have taken our stand, we believe it to be correct and we believe Congress will endorse it.' 25.

Again, over Hungary, Gollan blamed the revisionist elements within the Hungarian Party for the tragedy there:

'Under the pretence of fighting against mistakes they (the revisionists) attacked the Party from within as reaction attacked it from outside. They paralysed the Party and the state at the decisive moment and those who were faithful to Socialism were unable to hold back the advance of reaction.' 26.

And once again, self-congratulation about the leadership's decision:

'Our Executive Committee stood firm at the decisive moment on Hungary, and with every day that passes is more than ever convinced that our policy was correct.' 27.

In referring to the situation in Poland, and talks that the British Party had had with their Polish comrades, Gollan took the opportunity

to refer to the negative role Polish revisionists had played, in particular 'a section of the Party intelligentsia and students':

'All such circles saw in the past were the mistakes and distortions. They wanted freedom for all trends - hence in practice for the enemy. Those revisionists, our Polish comrades said, denied the Socialist character of the Soviet Union, and undermined the principles of unity and close co-operation of the Socialist countries. They slandered the Party as a 'compromised' Party, and denied its leading role. Comrades who wrote the letter to the 'New Statesman' might well draw a few lessons from all this.' 28.

No opportunity was lost to discredit opposition within the party wherever possible.

Gollan also dealt with the relationship between 'National Communism', and 'Working class internationalism'. He stated that while the advance to socialism had to have special features in each country, there was an essential characteristic - the taking of political power by the working class. This could only be achieved by mass struggles led by a party based on democratic centralism and Marxism-Leninism, which would break the economic and political power of capitalism, and establish social ownership and planned production. These, Gollan pointed out, 'were the central points of the Soviet experience which generally apply, and socialism can only be built in accordance with them.' 29. Referring briefly to 'The British Road to Socialism', Gollan added:

' Our 'British Road' is based on the specific conditions of Britain: it is the application of these principles in accordance with our background, history, working-class experience, traditions and institutions.

It is correct to stress our different way, but we must never lose sight of the main Marxist road, because no other road will ever achieve Socialism. In this sense there is one road, but with a variety of applications.' 30.

This is a revealing statement, showing in the clearest way the attitude that the leadership retained towards the Soviet Union, and its relationship to it. This is further underlined by Gollan's subsequent remarks which, having dismissed the rights of socialist countries to evolve distinctly different systems, implicitly asserted the right of the Soviet Union to police the socialist camp:

'We reject 'theories' of so-called national Communism as a step back from working-class internationalism to nationalism. They are a refusal to recognise the obvious existence of two social systems, treating them alike as two blocs. According to such views, various degrees of socialism have arisen out of the workers' Socialist movement in the past thirty to fifty years. Lenin says that the fundamental question of every revolution was that of political power; but that the point of view of 'national Communism' sees no fundamental difference between countries where the workers hold power and those where they do not, regarding them as countries with a different degree of Socialist development.

Our view is that there is a complete change where the working class holds power. Because of this, the countries of the Socialist camp should be rallied together, keeping close contact, protecting Socialism from imperialism. The idea that each Socialist country should act on its own irrespective of the others is not correct.' 31.

As discussed above (see Chapter Eight), there was no recognition of the right of nations to self-determination; the overall well-being of the socialist camp, as determined by the Soviet Union, was to prevail.

A section on Stalin took an extremely hard position, referring to lapses, violations and serious mistakes, but also seeing his great services to the revolution:

'...his victorious struggle against false theories that would have endangered it, his firm Marxist-Leninist outlook that guided the Five-Year Plans and helped the Soviet Union to become a great Socialist power, able to defeat Hitler's attack and help other countries on the road to Socialism. To overlook all this is to overlook the essence of the revolution.' 32.

Gollan asserted that the mistakes did not arise out of inherent characteristics within the Soviet system; political power, he assured the Congress, was in the hands of the people. Neither was democratic centralism responsible for Stalin's methods arising, for democratic centralism prevailed in Lenin's time, and in the earlier period of Stalin's life, 'when things were normal'.

In the final analysis, in spite of all the discussion and debate, Gollan returned to the view that the mistakes were ultimately the result of Stalin's personality:

'Stalin's mistakes originated, developed and spread in specific social and historical conditions: the inevitable lack of experience in leading the first workers' state; the influence of the capitalist and feudal past on the new system; the constricting effect on democracy of the long and bitter internal and external struggle. But even these conditions were not decisive: the actual form in which the distortions of Socialism arose was due to Stalin's personal character.' 33.

Going on to speak about the next steps for the party, Gollan spoke of the need to turn outward after a period of inward-looking discussion at the expense of mass work. He referred to the wave of revisionist ideas which had attacked the essential basis of the party, and encouraged defeatism and uncertainty. He stressed the need for building unity, recruiting to the party, and building the sales of the 'Daily Worker'.

In discussing the losses to the party he noted the membership drop from 33,960 at the previous Congress in 1956 to the 27,000 at the 1957 Congress. He disagreed, however, with those who said that the party had lost many of its best members; if they had been the best they wouldn't have left. On the question of inner-party democracy he made it clear that the Majority Report would strengthen the party in its work, whereas the Minority Report would undermine it as a fighting force.

Gollan dismissed both the ideas that the party should be an auxiliary of the Labour Party and withdraw from fighting elections, and that it should be a small organised revolutionary elite. The party should continue to work to be a mass party.

A section was devoted to the topic of workers and intellectuals within the party. All members, Gollan stated, were equal whatever their class origin, trade or profession. There was not, and would not be, any anti-intellectual attitude within the party, but, he added, the party opposed, and had always opposed, the introduction of petty-bourgeois ideas and practices into the party. Whilst opposing any sectarianism within the party which manifested itself in an anti-intellectual attitude, he also called on intellectuals to:

'...remain true to Marxist-Leninist principles and outlook, to resist the pressure the capitalist ideology, to link themselves in every possible way with the working class struggles, and be modest in their attitude to the working class, while remaining confident of their contribution to the fight.' 34.

Gollan's guidance to the party on the way forward stressed the importance of helping branches to work in the fore of, and give leadership to, mass struggles. The growth of self-reliant, political branches, closely connected with the labour movement and the people was essential, as was the development of factory branches, which had been declining in recent times. A renewed effort was also necessary on class education within the party, and socialist propaganda among the people at large.

With regard to amendments to the Resolution, several are of particular interest:

- a) on electoral policy: seeking to prevent communist candidates contesting if the Tory might get in - overwhelmingly defeated.
- b) on Hungary: seeking to reject EC policy - overwhelmingly defeated.
- c) on role of Soviet Union: seeking to reject EC attitude to working-class internationalism - overwhelmingly defeated.
- d) on revisionism - seeking to show that this was not currently the main danger - overwhelmingly defeated. 35.

Coverage in the 'Daily Worker' of the debate following Gollan's Report quoted a variety of speeches. Bill Dunn, the convenor of a factory in Clydeside, said that he sold the 'Daily Worker' every day outside his factory and had not lost any readers during the difficult period.

Reg Birch of Londonb appealed to 'intellectual comrades' not to ignore the recent great events of British working class struggle:

'Those comrades who thought of themselves as intellectuals should be helping to provide the workers with shot and shell agaianst capitalist propaganda'. 36.

Bill Zak, claiming to speak on behalf of some communists in the furniture trade called on the Congress to decide that those who had attacked the party and the Soviet Union in the capitalist press, and who had started factions within the party, had forfeited their right to party membership:

' 'Some of those people who for years have drawn salaries from the Party have overnight gone over to the class enemy to enjoy their thirty pieces of silver,' he said.

It was one thing to criticise and another to abuse and carry out disruptionist activities.' 37.

Critical speeches were also reported. Bob Hunter from Scotland pointed out that the privileges that had existed for party members in some countries were inconsistent with the leading role of the party, and placed the party above the workers. He was not, he stated, attacking democratic centralism, but found that the behaviour of those at the top who withheld information from the mass of the members, was incompatible with democratic centralism:

'If they were critical of the Soviet Union and the actions of its leaders this did not mean they were turning against the Soviet Union.

'We can see the achievements, but we can see the crimes, too', he said, 'and we demand an explanation of them, an explanation rather more deep than that given by Comrade Gollan.' ' 38.

Brian Behan, a member of the Executive Committee also made a critical speech:

' 'I don't agree with Comrade Gollan when he tends to pose as the main enemy the so-called revisionists whom he also lumps with anti-Marxist ideas', he said.

'Comrade Gollan seriously believes he is guarding against an attempt

to smash the Communist Party. But there is another danger, that of preventing the expression and development of new ideas.' ' 39.

Michael Barrett Brown from Colchester moved an amendment to the section of the resolution endorsing the EC's position on Hungary because he felt that it did not sufficiently condemn the distortions which had occurred there.

Frank Stanley, speaking for the Executive Committee, opposed the amendments and defended the EC's position on Hungary:

'The executive, supported by an overwhelming majority, took a decision to be on the side of the Russian lads, who were sacrificing their lives to defend Socialism, and not to be on the side of Dulles, Eisenhower, Mindzenty, or the Horthy fascists pouring over the frontiers.

Hungary would have become a dagger pointing at the heart of the Soviet Union and a bomber base which would have increased the danger of war.'

40.

Alan Bush from London also opposed the amendments, condemning as armchair philosophers those who said that the Hungarian events could have led to a Coalition Government.

'The British Road to Socialism'

The debate on 'The British Road to Socialism' was opened by George Matthews. Matthews comended 'The British Road' to the delegates for being the only programme which showed the path to socialism in Britain, and explained why socialism was necessary - as the only final solution to the problems of society.

Matthews rejected the ideas of the so-called 'New Socialism' of the Labour Party, which, he insisted, were merely old capitalist ideas in another form:

'..the 'New Socialism' in fact turns out to be the repudiation of Socialism.

The 'new thinking' is as old as the hills - it is capitalist thinking of the kind which has been characteristic of right-wing Social-Democracy for decades...

We reject the standpoint that capitalism has found a way to solve its problems. We are against all theories which seek to argue that some sort of 'reformed' or 'people's capitalism' can abolish the possibility of slumps, guarantee full employment and rising standards, and remove the drive to war.' 41.

On the nature of the path to Socialism, Matthews quoted Lenin twice; once to show that not all nations will reach socialism in the same way and that it was possible to have a peaceful transition to socialism; and secondly to show that although there will be an abundance of

political forms in the transition from capitalism to communism, in essence there will only be one - the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this way, Matthews attempted to answer the arguments of both those who found the Communist Party's approach to be reformist and revisionist, and those who felt that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the need for a Communist Party was now out of date:

'If we speak of a British road to Socialism this is not because we have become reformists, who have ceased to believe in the need for a revolution...We remain convinced that Socialism can only come as a result of the taking of power from the hands of the capitalist class by the working class. We adhere to this fundamental principle of Marxism in the British Road to Socialism, when we say:

'In order, therefore, to advance to Socialism, the dominant position of the rich must be ended. Political power must be taken from the hands of the capitalist minority, and firmly grasped by the majority of the people, led by the working class.'

The fact that it is possible for this revolution to take place peacefully does not make it less of a revolution.' 42.

Matthews also went on to explain why the concept of 'People's Government' in the 1951 programme had been changed to that of 'Socialist Government' in the new draft. People's Democracy was the term used for the form of state power established in the countries of Eastern Europe, and was concerned in the first instance with an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist revolution, based on an alliance between the

industrial working class and the peasantry. In the second instance it fulfilled the functions of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the building of Socialism.

The difference, however, in the stage of development and of class relations, between Britain and Eastern Europe was very different, and therefore the process of transformation would be different. Talking, therefore, of People's Democracy in Britain, would only lead to confusion. Matthews could not agree, though, with those comrades who argued that the programme should speak of a Labour government, rather than a Socialist government, for none of the three Labour governments in the previous thirty-three years had taken decisive measures to break the power of the capitalists. The government would be based on Communist and Labour Parties, or a united working-class party if that had been achieved.

Matthews also touched on the question of socialist democracy and liberty, reminding comrades of the limited nature of bourgeois political democracy, and the importance within a socialist state of removing certain 'freedoms' - to exploit the workers, to oppress, kill and torture colonial peoples:

'There has been a wrong tendency to see as the main need the limiting of the rights and power of the Socialist government, in the mistaken belief that this would guarantee democratic rights to the mass of the people. The opposite is the case. Unless the Socialist government has the necessary powers and the means to enforce the law, the capitalists will be more able to sabotage its work and more likely to attempt to

restore capitalism, and this would be the greatest possible disaster for the working people'. 43.

It would be wrong, therefore, Matthews pointed out, to lose all sense of class reality because 'in the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries mistakes and injustices have occurred in the course of carrying out a generally correct policy'. 44.

Matthews did also recognise that the extension of democratic rights for the people did require a conscious effort to be made by the Socialist government and the organs of the state. There was a danger that measures designed to be used against the class enemy could infringe the rights of ordinary people. The key to solving this problem was the degree to which the people, collectively, could be drawn into the running of the country, the essence of socialist democracy being the full participation of the people.

Despite these final remarks there does seem a danger in Matthews was seeing that the problems of the 'People's Democracies' would have been duplicated under the Socialist Government which he was speaking of.

In referring to other political parties, Matthews stressed that other political parties would have full rights of participation in society and political life - not because they wished to preserve the Tory Party in existence, but because they recognised that it could only be defeated through the ideological struggle and the building of socialism. In this way, people would be won away from supporting the Tory party.

The final section of the Report referred to the alliance of the British people with the peoples of the Empire, where Matthews urged

support for the Majority formulation (see above Chapter Six).

Matthews concluded with full confidence that 'The British Road' would help to bring clear socialist aims to the mass struggles of the British working class.

The debate following the report centred on the following issues:

- a) the future relations between the British people and the peoples of the Commonwealth and Empire: the Minority view as put by Palme Dutt was carried by 298 for and 210 against.
- b) workers' control of nationalised industries as opposed to workers' participation: overwhelmingly defeated.
- c) workers' councils: opposing the use of parliament to assist in the transition to Socialism: overwhelmingly defeated.
- d) nationalisation of land: seeking to nationalise all land, including that of smallholders: overwhelmingly defeated.
- e) rights of political parties: seeking to oppose guarantee of democratic rights for political parties, or to promise democratic rights providing they supported Socialism: overwhelmingly defeated.
- f) no compensation for former owners of nationalised property: overwhelmingly defeated - principle of compensation upheld. 45.

The debate was covered in the 'Daily Worker'. Various contributions were made on the possibility or otherwise of a peaceful transition to socialism. Bob Morrison from Kent complained that there was too much emphasis on the peaceful road to Socialism and insufficient on the fact that the road 'would be determined by class struggle':

'This emphasis fed certain illusions about the Labour Party, he said.

'I have even heard comrades work out that it will take three Labour Governments to reach the British Road.' ' 46.

Dave Kelly from South Essex said that it was true that the transition could be relatively peaceful because of the existence of the world socialist system, but that 'the degree of peacefulness would be in direct proportion to the degree of unity in working-class struggle.' 47.

In the discussion on the relations between Britain and the Empire, R. Palme Dutt put the case for the Minority viewpoint:

'Our Colonial comrades, including the West Indian and West African branches, in the overwhelming majority support the minority formulation. We should not lightly ignore their opinion.

Since 1951 no Communist Party in the Empire has accepted or taken up our formulation of fraternal association. If the Communist Parties of the Empire were putting forward this proposal, that would be a different matter.

But if only the British party, at the centre of imperialism, is putting it forward and all our brother Parties are turning away from it, then we should think twice.' 48.

Sid Foster, from Lancashire and Cheshire District Committee, spoke in support of the Majority viewpoint:

'Those supporting the minority thought the majority formulation would create suspicion in the minds of our Colonial brothers, he said, but this suspicion arose from imperialist enslavement...

It would only be removed by the building up of a mighty mass movement of the British people in unity with their Colonial brothers for the complete liberation of the Colonies.' 49.

Inner Party Democracy

The Discussion on the Report on Inner Party Democracy was opened by John Mahon, who stated that the purpose of the report was to define and explain the party's organisational principle to make the party's political practice more effective, and to ensure the growth in numbers and influence of the Communist Party.

The discussion on the Commission had, however, raised the question of what type of party was required by the working class. Two trends of opinion had emerged:

'One trend has questioned the conception of a revolutionary working class Party of a new type, based on Marxism-Leninism. Proposals have been brought forward which would mean a retreat from this conception and from the principle of democratic centralism. This trend finds expression in the Minority Report.

The other trend considers that for Communists there cannot be any retreat from the conception of the Party of a new type, ideologically united on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist theory, and accepting democratic centralism as its organisational principle; that our task is to persist in our efforts to build such a Party in Britain, to correct our mistakes, to train and educate the whole of our Party in the midst of the class struggle. This trend finds expression in the Majority Report, endorsed by the Executive Committee.' 50.

Congress, Mahon urged, had to take a decisive stand in relation to these two trends; rejection of the Minority Report was the way forward.

Mahon considered that the workings of democratic centralism should be improved: that branches should be more politically active; particularly in factories; that Marxist-Leninist education should be more widely available; that there should be a much fuller two way flow of ideas between branches and leading committees; and that more members should be drawn into political discussion. He also commented on the question of factional activity, which had been a major topic of discussion over the previous year:

'It is necessary to reaffirm the obligation of every member to defend the unity of the Party and to prohibit factions and factional activity.' 51.

Mahon also dealt with what he considered to be a number of 'erroneous ideas' which had arisen in the discussion, such as:

'...whether individual members may contract out from decisions they do not agree with; whether individuals should be permitted to publish their own material outside Party control; whether branches should have the right to mandate their delegates to Congress; whether branches could veto nominations of their members for election to higher committees; whether a minority should have the right to organise a faction, or to publish material outside the Party press; the idea of a federal Executive.' 52.

All these views, Mahon considered, would tend to weaken or destroy democratic centralism and the Party's ability to give united leadership to the working class in its struggle against capitalism. The following issues constituted the main aspects of the debate:

- a) to substitute the Minority Report for the Majority Report: against Minority 472, for 23, abstentions 15.
- b) that branches should mandate delegates: overwhelmingly defeated.
- c) for a Federal Executive: overwhelmingly defeated.
- d) that there should be no limit to the proportion of full-time party workers able to be elected to the EC: overwhelmingly carried.
- e) that the right to form factions should be recognised: overwhelmingly defeated.
- f) that individual members have the right to contract out of fighting for Party decisions: overwhelmingly defeated. 53.

The Majority Report was subsequently put to the vote and endorsed by an overwhelming vote.

The debate was also covered in the 'Daily Worker'.

Elaine Lane from London urged that when people in higher committees held minority views the branches should have the right to know of it:

' 'Our branch has had a thorough discussion on this question and we were also the first branch in our area to reregister 100 per cent before the end of November, so we are not just armchair theoreticians,' she said.' 54.

John Jordan of the Midlands declared it would be wrong to adopt a looser form of democratic centralism:

' 'We have just come through the sharpest struggle we have ever experienced and I am convinced that without our form of democratic centralism we would have collapsed as a Party,' he said.' 55.

Frances Dean from Manchester opposed any idea that the names of EC members voting against EC decisions should be published:

' 'If a united Party is an essential factor in the fight against capitalism, surely a united leadership is also an essential factor. To give the right to executive members to carry disagreements downwards would prevent the full mobilisation of the Party and would lead to splits and divisions from top to bottom. It is true that on occasions the minority view proves to be correct but in my view 99 cases out of 100 the minority is wrong.' ' 56.

Later on in the evening session on the inner party democracy debate, Professor Hyman Levy spoke, giving an impassioned speech, during which J.R.Campbell, in the chair, had to ask for order several times:

'He opened by saying that if what he said appeared as insurrection and disruption at this stage it was for the benefit of the Party. Although he was an intellectual he claimed to be a worker living by the sweat of his brain.

He asked why delegates had not analysed why they lost 7,000 members and said that it was not through revisionism. He declared that what took place under Stalin had been growing and developing for years, and that they had to understand the reasons for it, but the leadership had not helped.

In his visit to the Soviet Union he asserted he had seen things which shook him, and if the Party leadership knew only half of what went on why did they not tell us?

He wanted to know what Gollan knew about this and how many times Pollitt told people to shut their mouths. He said he was not going to shut his mouth about it.' 57.

Andrew Rothstein received an ovation for his hard-hitting response to Hyman Levy's contribution:

' 'The struggle was particularly violent in Russia in 1907 to 1911, when triumphant reaction was making a counter-offensive after the defeat of the first revolution.

In those years, tens of thousands of workers left the Party of Marxism

because, Comrade Levy, they were bewildered and confused by groups of backboneless and spineless intellectuals who had turned in upon their own emotions and frustrations (loud interruptions) to rend the Party instead of using their capabilities to rally the workers around it (more interruptions).

Of course they had not at their disposal the capitalist Press, with its vast circulation, which is the case today.'

At this point there were loud cheers, mingled with protests.

Andrew Rothstein said that the sort of ideas put forward in this Congress would drag the working class back and give hundreds of opportunities to the capitalists to defeat it.

'We want a stronger and more united Party to lead the workers,' he concluded amid thunderous applause.' 58.

Moving the Minority Report, Christopher Hill said that he agreed with most of Hyman Levy's speech:

' 'There is an authoritarian tendency in the Party, a tendency to distrust the rank and file and keep down discussion in the Party. We have been living in a world of illusions. That is why the 20th Congress came as such a shock to so many Party members. We have been living in a smug little world of our own invention.' ' 59.

Hill also admitted, however, that he had been one to put the blame on the leadership for everything, but thought that this was not entirely correct:

' 'It is important not to make a scapegoat of our leadership. We are all responsible for the state the Party has got into. Those of us who knew something about the Soviet Union have a grave responsibility for having hushed up some of the things we knew or suspected.' ' 60.

Ivor Montagu also replied to Levy's contribution with a speech 'delivered with burning sincerity which was long applauded':

' 'When Comrade Levy spoke here and left the hall I think that every person felt a sympathy for a human being visibly suffering from deep emotion,' he said. 'But I suggest that among all the other divisions we are trying to avoid is one between those who have shown emotion and those who have not. There is not one member of our Party who has not taken these events to heart but some of us do not wear our wounds on our sleeves. In one sense we all share a responsibility for every person that Hitler slaughtered, for every child that is going to get cancer because of the H-bomb and for the crimes which took place in the Soviet Union.

But we must not project this upon Socialism. We must not project it upon the Marxist Party. Least of all should we project it on the Soviet Union and its leadership.' ' 61.

Fryer's Appeal

Peter Fryer appealed at the Congress against his expulsion from the Communist Party, but the Appeals Committee which had heard his representation unanimously agreed to reject his appeal. The Appeals Committee statement wished to make it quite clear that this was not because of his views expressed over the events in Hungary, but because:

- '1. He had carried out a public and unprincipled attack on the Party by articles in the capitalist and non-Party Press and on television.
 2. That prior to his suspension, after his suspension and after his expulsion, and during the time prior to Congress while his appeal was pending, he had continued these attacks on the Party. That he stated that he had no apologies and no regrets for his statements.
 3. That he had expressed in respect to the Party leadership, the rank and file of the Party, the committees of this Congress and Congress itself an attitude of complete hostility by his description of this Congress as a 'rigged Congress and a phoney Congress.'
- ' 62.

Fryer's appeal was rejected by 486 votes to 31, with 11 abstentions.

Notes:

1. WN, 17 November 1956.
2. WN, 24 November 1956.
3. Ibid.
4. WN, 1 December 1956.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. WN, 8 December 1956.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. WN, 5 January 1957.
11. WN, 12 January 1957.
12. WN, 5 January 1957.
13. WN, 12 January 1957.

14. WN, 26 January 1957.
15. George Matthews - interview, 1988.
16. 'Political Report', John Gollan, London, 1957.
17. 'Summary for Reporting', London, 1957.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. 'Political Report'.
22. 'Summary for Reporting'.
23. Ibid.
24. 'Political Report', page 12.
25. Ibid., page 13.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., page 14.
29. Ibid., page 15.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., page 16.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., page 22.
35. 'Summary for Reporting'.
36. DW, 20 April 1957.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. 'Report on BRS', George Matthews, London, 1957, page 3.

42. Ibid., pages 5-6.

43. Ibid., page 13.

44. Ibid.

45. 'Summary for Reporting'.

46. DW, 22 April 1957.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. 'Report on Inner Party Democracy', John Mahon, London, 1957, page 3.

51. 'Summary for Reporting'.

52. Ibid.

53. 'Summary for Reporting'.

54. DW, 22 April 1957.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. DW, 23 April 1957.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. DW, 22 April 1957.

Chapter Ten

After the Congress

Conclusions

Following the Special Congress, the newly-elected Executive Committee decided at its first meeting on the 11th of May, to issue a Political Letter to all members on the significance of the Congress and the next steps for the party in carrying out agreed policy.

The aims were specified as:

- '1) To increase the political activity of the Party for the policy of the Congress Political Report and Resolution.
- 2) To develop close relations and united action with all sections of the Labour movement.
- 3) To strengthen the unity of the Party and resolve remaining differences.
- 4) To improve the democratic working of the Party and its political life, along the lines suggested by the Majority Report on Inner-Party Democracy agreed by Congress.' 1.

The Letter praised the widespread discussion that had preceeded the Congress, and observed that although liquidationist and anti-working class ideas had been put forward, it had been necessary given the special conditions, to have these views aired and categorically rejected by Congress itself:

'Decisions by votes of full Congress were reached on every controversial issue. In every case these votes revealed an overwhelming majority for the policies put forward by the Executive Committee against the alternative propositions of a revisionist nature. The Minority Report on Inner-Party Democracy was rejected by over 20 to 1. This expressed the general outlook of the Congress.' 2.

The Letter outlined the decisions taken by the Congress and urged that all members become fully acquainted with them and that every effort should be taken through comradely discussion, to win unity around Congress decisions:

'The unity of the Communist Party is not a mechanical unity based on discipline. The decisions of the Congress are binding on all members, but our aim must be that Party unity is always based on political conviction, with careful attention to all questions raised by members. There should be no impatient or hostile attitude towards those who may still have points of disagreement, but comradely discussion to clear up such questions.' 3.

This clearly showed an anxiety about the declining membership, but also revealing was a section entitled 'Guard the Unity of the Party Against Attempts at Disruption'. The Letter touched on misrepresentation of the Congress by the capitalist press, but was more concerned about attempts at disruption on the left:

'An organised effort is being made by people hostile to the Party, open Trotskyists and some ex-members, to draw Party members into their circle by persuading them to participate in 'independent' journals, or 'discussion forums' run under their auspices for the purpose of attacking Marxism-Leninism, the international Communist movement and the Communist Party.' 4.

Whilst welcoming frank discussion and united action among all sections of Labour, Socialist and Communist opinion, the Letter also stressed that:

'1) Communists in all gatherings with non-Party people must always fight for the principles of Marxism-Leninism and the policy of the Party and reserve inner-Party discussion and controversy for consideration within the Party.

2) It is harmful to give assistance to Trotskyist and anti-Party people who try to cover up their aims by the participation of one or two Communists as sympathetic contributors in journals or conferences whose main political content is anti-Communist and anti-Party.' 5.

The Letter expressed the conviction of the EC that all Party members would have sufficient political understanding to be able to recognise and defeat attempts to disrupt the Party or organise factions within the Party from outside.

The Executive Committee's anxiety had been raised by a Conference of Socialist Forums, held at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield on the 27th and 28th of April, 1957. 136 people attended, primarily from

Yorkshire, London, Lancashire and Cheshire. Most of the those present were former Communist Party members, who had left the Party during 1956-7, although there were also those like Eric Heffer who had left in the late 1940s, alongside rank-and-file Labour Party members and several people still members of the Communist Party.

By the time the Conference was called, there were around twenty to thirty Socialist Forums throughout the country, around ten in London, as well as in Liverpool, Hull, Sheffield, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Halifax and Glasgow. The Forums did not intend to launch or build a new party; rather they saw themselves as having an educational and theoretical function.

There was a longish report of the Conference in the first issue of 'The Newsletter', a weekly letter edited by Peter Fryer, which later became more explicitly Trotskyist.

The Socialist Forums also produced their own newsletter, entitled 'Forum', of which only two or three issues appeared. According to Peter Fryer, the Socialist Forums faded away very quickly: 'Wortley Hall was their apogee.' 6.

The Trotskyist grouping around 'Labour Review', with their New Park Publications (which also reprinted Fryer's 'Hungarian Tragedy' in the 1980s), printed a pamphlet entitled 'A Letter to a Member of the Communist Party', by John Daniels, written in January 1957.

The perspective of the letter was a criticism of the party as near-moribund, theoretically degenerate, and ruled by Stalinist party bosses:

'...who used to behave like little tin gods in their District Offices, treating ordinary party members like pawns or serfs.' 7.

Daniels commented that peaceful co-existence, and its 'counterpart' in Britain, 'The British Road to Socialism', led to liquidationist tendencies, and the sinking of the revolutionary movement inside the Labour Party. Daniels went on to discuss various instances where he felt the Communist Party had sold out on the workers, from the BMC engineering strike in Britain, to the events in Hungary; he also referred to the 'international implications of Stalinism':

'...I think it important to study the three great proletarian revolutions of fairly recent times which were defeated, and defeated, I believe, primarily because of the influence of Stalinism upon the Communist Parties in these countries - Germany, China(1926) and Spain. Here we shall be seeing working itself out in practice the international implications of Stalin's revisionist theory of 'socialism in one country'. 8.

Another pamphlet which was published, probably in early 1957, was entitled 'Why we Left the Communist Party', and carried the explanation:

'The following statement has been prepared by members of the Communist Party in Nottingham to elucidate the motives which led them to resign from the Party. These 12 include 4 members of the Area

Committee, 3 Branch Secretaries and 2 YCL District Committee Members.' 9.

Those supporting the pamphlet and forming a new Marxist Group, had come to the conclusion that they could not remain in the Communist Party, because:

- '1) The Party leaders are no more than the agents of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 2) The anti-democratic nature of the Party structure makes it impossible for the rank and file to influence its basic policies or change its leadership.
- 3) The Party is a despised sect. It is despised not because it is loyal to the principles of Socialism, but because it has betrayed them.' 10.

Such was the general tenor of the criticisms levelled against the Communist Party leadership, whether from 'left' or 'right', from those who joined 'Trotskyist' groups or from those who criticised from an increasingly 'liberal-conscience' perspective.

(As Henry Pelling commented about the second edition of 'The Reasoner':

'Perhaps without realising it, the editors had already passed from a Leninist to a liberal position, which was exemplified by their use of a quotation from Diderot:

'Though a lie may serve for the moment, it is inevitably injurious in the long run; the truth, on the other hand, inevitably serves in the end even if it may hurt for the moment.'') 11.

But in addition to the published, articulate and highly developed criticisms which came from a variety of quarters, there were also many views expressed by individuals who chose to leave, such as Jim Roche, a party worker from Yorkshire. Here he gives a view on the high level of resignations from the Party:

'The rank and file who were left were like the Gadarene swine, following a leadership incapable of adapting to a new situation, who could only see the need for minor changes and failed even by their own standards of criticism and self-criticism to recognise the magnitude of the crisis and the need for a fundamental reappraisal of their policies and organisation.

...It is true to say that the drift out of the Party had followed Khrushchev's speech and was accelerated by the events in Poland and Hungary; but the main and important exodus followed the failure of the EC to live up to their own standards as Marxists. Their attitude of 'Everything is in the Past', 'Spots on the Sun', 'cult of personality'; 'It wasn't our mistake', etc. etc. could never be accepted by those members whose critical faculties had been aroused.'

12.

The year of debate within the Communist Party showed that Roche's analysis was fundamentally correct - the leadership were incapable of

adapting to the new situation; they saw no real reason for change, and although they allowed wide-ranging debate within the Party press, they took every opportunity to inveigh against the dissidents. Having set up Commissions to look into the system of inner-party democracy, and to update 'The British Road to Socialism', they made sure that the composition of the Commissions was such that the majority viewpoint - the leadership viewpoint - would prevail. On all important issues, with the exception of the formulation on the 'fraternal alliance', they won the day. The Minority Report, which became the focus for opposition at the Congress, was pilloried and derided.

Having encouraged Hyman Levy to participate in the delegation to the Soviet Union, the leadership produced Willie Gallacher to assert that anti-Semitism could never occur in the Soviet Union.

At every turn, the leadership took a defensive position, reproducing the Soviet view on the cult of the personality, failing to look seriously at the theoretical problems thrown up by the crimes of Stalin. The stock response to anguished pleas or criticisms from the membership, was that now everything would be set back on the right track, and although bad things had happened it was not surprising given what the Soviet Union had been through, and after all, look how much they had achieved.

At root, the leadership subscribed to the view that the end justified the means, and with that underpinning their political position, almost anything could be, and was, justified. This was perhaps the underlying issue over which they were at odds with many of the dissidents - those around 'The Reasoner' for example, with their

emphasis on humanism and truth.

It is in studying the debate between the leadership and the contributors to 'The Reasoner', that the gulf in political positions becomes so apparent. For Saville and Thompson, the revelations, and then the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, challenged their beliefs to the core; on analysis, they remained Marxists, but rejected a Communist tradition which was unable to cast aside its untenable baggage. The leadership appeared actually unable to question. Such was the weight of the traditions of the Communist movement, of loyalty, defence and obedience, that they were rendered incapable of independent thought. This relationship had remained unchanged after 1943, and the much vaunted independence of the British Party was in reality a facade; that is not to say that the CPGB was merely a pawn of the CPSU - it is, rather, to say that in 1956 the bonds were deep and resilient. Clearly, too, in a movement based on international solidarity, where class interests transcended national boundaries, there had been little inclination prior to this point to create a distance between the CPGB and the CPSU.

Recent revelations about the CPGB, whilst not surprising, confirm this assessment of the Party's relationship with Moscow - not only George Matthews' views on the writing of 'The British Road', but also Reuben Falber's statement on funding from Moscow, commencing in 1957, as a financial recompense for the harm done to the Party by the events of 1956. 13.

1956 can be regarded as a wasted opportunity; the traditions, structure and culture of the Communist Party were such, however, that availing itself of the opportunity was an impossibility.

Conclusion

In writing this thesis, I have worked from a position of sympathy with the aims of the international communist movement, as originally conceived in 1919, and the philosophy of Marxism on which it was based.

The consequences of Communist Party rule for both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the negative and tragic experiences seem to have so overwhelmingly outweighed the positive benefits, must exercise the minds of any who give credence to Marx's philosophy. Why was it that a political movement based on high principles of equality, emancipation, democracy and collective struggle produced regimes that were in many ways the very antithesis of these values? What has particularly interested me in this thesis, was why, when virtually all the political, social and economic conditions which gave rise to Stalinism in the Soviet Union were absent in Britain, nevertheless within the CPGB itself, as well as other western European parties, many of the internal tendencies within the CPSU and the Soviet Union like suppression of dissent and debate, vilification of individuals, complete domination by a highly centralised self-perpetuating leadership and so on, were reproduced - albeit on a less damaging scale, because they did not hold state power.

There are views, such as those of Robert Michels and Max Weber, which suggest that all political parties, whatever their hue will tend towards bureaucratisation, towards authoritarian centralisation, and the 'iron law of oligarchy', which will drive a wedge between the

membership and the leadership, corrupted by maintaining their own status and interests - however small, as was certainly the case with the CPGB, those rewards might be. Whilst it seems clear that parties are constrained, through their very functions as organisations, within certain democratic limits, citing an 'iron law' appears to be an inadequate explanation. Studies of the early period of the Bolshevik Party in power show that neither Weber's nor Michels' thesis corresponds with the Bolshevik experience.

(see 'The Bolshevik Party in Revolution, 1917-1923', Robert Service, London, 1979, pp 200-202)

Looking specifically within the Communist movement itself, it is clear that the organisational principle of democratic centralism was a major factor in the intense centralisation of the Comintern and the Communist Parties; furthermore, the complete disregard of its democratic balances under Stalin, and concurrently to a greater or lesser extent in other Communist Parties, facilitated the development in all Communist parties, of Stalinist anti-democratic methods and practices. The practice, and abuse, of democratic centralism was common to all parties.

During the period of the Third International, from 1919-43, democratic centralism was implemented on a worldwide scale, through the organisation of the Comintern, as one single party of the entire world, and the Soviet model did prevail, because of its preeminent status in the movement. Although in 1943, the parties were no longer formally committed to international democratic centralism, nevertheless its application within each party continued to be

heavily influenced by the Soviet model. It was only really after 1956 that an increasing number of Communist Parties began to modify the system, in recognition of:

'a serious error - too great an emphasis on centralism and an insufficient emphasis on democracy.'

(IPD Report, Communist Party, 1957, page 36)

Most communist parties continued to accept what Gramsci called the 'elastic formula' of democratic centralism, where different balances could be struck between democracy and centralism, and it has only really been since 1989, that many parties have rejected democratic centralism wholesale, seeing it as too tainted by its association with Stalinism, and no longer considering that it could be sufficiently adapted and reformed.

The Italian Communist Party, no longer existing in its original name and form, has been particularly interesting as a pathbreaker for reform in the Communist movement. This is not, however, only a recent development; in 1956, Togliatti put forward a more radical analysis of Stalinism than the Soviet leadership was engaging in. In his interview with 'Nuovi argomenti', of May-June, 1956, he made clear his objections:

'...we cannot consider as satisfactory the position adopted by the (20th) Congress, which is now being amply developed by the Soviet press, with regard to the errors of Stalin, and the causes and conditions which made them possible.

The cause of everything is said to lie in the 'cult of the personality' and in the cult of one person who had particular and serious defects, who lacked modesty and was overfond of personal power...'

('On Gramsci and other writings', Palmiro Togliatti, London, 1979, page 129)

Togliatti pointed out that attributing either all marvellous things in the Soviet Union, as previously, to Stalin, or all terrible things now to him, was outside of the criterion of judgement proper to Marxism, and obscured the real issue:

'The real problems escape notice, such as the method by which, and the reason why, Soviet society could and did stray so far from the democratic path and from the legality which it had traced out for itself, arriving as far as degeneration.'

(Ibid.)

Looking for other reasons, Togliatti linked Stalin's errors to excessive bureaucratisation of the economic and political systems and of the life of the party, although he was unable to say which was the cause and which the consequence. He also speculated as to whether this weight of bureaucracy was in some way a tradition of old Russia. The intense centralization of power and the adoption of repressive measures during the civil war period were, in Togliatti's view, entirely necessary; it was the responsibility of the Soviet comrades, Togliatti felt, to discover whether the move away from these policies

came about once the conditions necessitating them had changed, as Lenin had desired, 'or whether through force of inertia, they failed to bring about the necessary modification or abandonment.'

Other questions were also raised by the Italian leader: whether the damaging limitations of the democratic regime originated from the party; the tendency of Soviet propaganda to exaggerate successes and to conceal failures and contradictions; the tendency to view problems as the result of sabotage, of counter-revolutionaries.

Togliatti did not doubt that Stalin had made major and positive contributions to the building of socialism in the Soviet Union; he did not doubt that the Soviet Union had, overall, been following the correct path to this goal. But in the context of the time, his criticism of the Soviet leadership was quite outspoken - his demand for a more rigorous analysis was unusual.

Contrasted with the analysis which Pollitt had made in 'World News' only shortly prior to the publication of Togliatti's interview, the latter seems remarkable for his critical insight, given his background in the movement. That this interview was published in 'World News', in the summer of 1956, indicates that the British leadership was attempting to engage in debate.

Obviously the Italian Party and its leadership was held in high regard outside Italy - it was the largest western European Communist Party, and as such had considerable status. That Togliatti challenged the views of the Soviet leadership would make it more acceptable for the CPGB leadership to publish critical views. Later on in 1956, when the events in Hungary occurred, the Italian Party once again took a more independent approach to events, and although they did eventually

accept the intervention in Hungary, they referred to it as a 'regrettable necessity'.

However, if the CPGB's leadership lagged behind Togliatti in its analysis and independence of thought, it should be said that the leadership of the French Communist Party took a much more rigid and intolerant view of debate and of criticism of Stalin - there was, for example, no debate in 'L'Humanite' of the sort that existed in the 'Daily Worker'.

The French Party Congress, held in the summer of 1956 in Le Havre, made no mention of the events raised by Khrushchev at the 20th Congress. Maurice Thorez did, however, make a defence of democratic centralism, which indicates that there must have been some lobby for change in the PCF. As J.R.Campbell reported, in the 'Weekly Letter', in August 1956:

'He (Thorez) outlined the principles of Democratic Centralism and strongly opposed the suggestion that this basis of organisation should be changed...The Party, Thorez said, must be based on a united policy and a united leadership and could not tolerate the existence of fractions, nor could it allow under the pretext of liberty of expression, people to challenge the fundamental principles on which the Party was based.'

('Weekly Letter', Communist Party, 3 August 1956, page 3)

The practice of democratic centralism, as carried out by the PCF, was far more authoritarian than that of the British Party. Take Congress procedure for example: in the election of the National leadership, no

individual votes were allowed as they were in the British Party - a whole slate was put to the Congress to be adopted by acclaim; similarly with Congress resolutions: although these were circulated in advance to branches, who were able to submit amendments, the amendments never went to Congress for debate and voting - the Politburo decided which were accepted beforehand, and then the resolution as amended by the leadership was put to the Congress for acceptance, once again by acclaim. Clearly Gramsci's 'elastic formula' did operate, and the British Communist Party was by no means the atmosphere most repressive of individual participation and the availability of information to the members.

The British leadership was not able to make information known to the members immediately after the 20th Congress, because, after all, Pollitt returned from Moscow having been excluded from the Closed Session. This was not the case with Thorez. At the first meeting of the French Central Committee after the 20th Congress, Thorez was absent, and Duclos summarised the Congress, revealing no more than had already been published in 'L'Humanite'. Some of the other members of the Central Committee had heard about the Secret Speech and its contents from contacts abroad, and requested fuller details and discussion, which were not forthcoming.

Jean Pronteau, a member of the PCF Central Committee in 1956 present at the meeting, visited Poland shortly afterwards, where he was given full details of the Secret Speech by a leader of the Polish party. On his return to Paris, he went immediately to see Thorez:

'Thorez received me in his office. Straight away I said to him: 'I've just got back from Poland, I've seen the report.' He looked at me expressionless: 'The report? What report?' I replied: 'The report K made in closed session, the secret report.' Without turning a hair, Thorez said: 'There is no secret report.' I started to get worked up, and took out of my briefcase the notes I had taken in Poland. At that point Thorez said to me: 'Oh! so you've got it. You should have said so straight away.' And he added in a pontifical manner: 'Anyway, just remember one thing. This report doesn't exist. Besides, soon it will never have existed. We must pay no attention to it.'

(from 'Socialist Register, 1976', page 59, first published in 'Politique Hebdo, Spring 1976')

According to Pronteau, Thorez had links with the 'anti-Party' group in the Soviet leadership, around Molotov and Kaganovitch, and was banking on their winning before the Secret Speech became widely known. As Maurice Kriegel-Valrimont, also a PCF CC member said:

'One day Courtade, who had also been sent to Moscow, came back to Paris instructed by Molotov to tell the 'French comrades' that there were still some in Moscow who remained real bolsheviks. It was this opposition to the line taken at the 20th Congress, which Thorez upheld in France.'

(Ibid., page 60)

There is no evidence that any such view or intention existed in the British party leadership. On being asked about this position being

taken by Thorez, George Matthews had no recollection of hearing of any international attempts to either suppress the information, or displace Khrushchev. The CPGB had, of course, never been a member of the Cominform, and would not have been, in a routine way, privy to much of the internal fighting within the international movement; it was also so small and insignificant relative to the PCI and PCF that other parties would not have considered it worthwhile to canvass its support over controversial issues within the movement.

Seeing the position of the CPGB in 1956, in the context of the French and Italian situations, the British leadership appeared to steer a course between the two extremes; whilst allowing critical views to be expressed, they certainly did not come up with any of their own.

My thesis has focussed in some detail on democratic centralism within the CPGB in 1956, and the campaign by the dissidents to restore the democratic element to it, whilst retaining the essential prerequisite of unity in action. At the Special Congress in 1957, the Minority Report proposed by Christopher Hill became the focus for the desire for change and democratisation of the party. The dissidents recognised that democratic centralism had to change; they recognised that democratic centralism had failed to prevent the consolidation of Stalin's power within the Soviet Union and had resulted, in the CPGB and other Communist Parties, in irremovable bureaucratic elites, self-perpetuating leaderships which aped, to a greater or lesser extent the self-glorification of Stalin, and, to a greater or lesser extent were corrupted by power and their desire to hold on to it.

Clearly democratic centralism, as an organisational principle predated Stalin's period of power, and predated Stalinism; I would certainly not equate the two, but I would say that the party structure facilitated the rise of Stalin and the consolidation of his power, and that democratic centralism in the international movement coupled with a desire to emulate Moscow and follow its rules, almost made a virtue of authoritarian leaderships in the Stalin style, and encouraged the most extraordinary rigidity, and lack of individual and creative thought.

The question of democratic centralism and Stalinism has been discussed by Roy Medvedev, in his remarkable work, 'Let History Judge', although he does place most emphasis on the role of Stalin himself in the degeneration of the Soviet Union.

In the section of the book entitled 'The Preconditions of Stalinism', Medvedev attempts to understand why Stalinism was able to develop in the Soviet Union and investigates a variety of different suggestions about Stalin himself; that he didn't know about the mass repressions, and that Beria was responsible (an opinion I had also heard expressed by older members of the CPGB); that Stalin was mad; that Stalin had knowingly purged the party to save the revolution from bureaucratic degeneration; that Stalin had been a Tsarist police agent; all of these explanations, after detailed research, Medvedev discounts as inadequate:

'Thus we have come to the conclusion that neither the intrigues of Stalin's aides nor his own morbid suspiciousness played the decisive role in the events of 1936-39, although it would be wrong to deny the

significance of these factors altogether. What, then, were the basic motives of Stalin's crimes?

The first and most important was undoubtedly Stalin's measureless ambition. This incessant though carefully hidden lust for unlimited power appeared in Stalin much earlier than 1937. Even though he had great power, it was not enough - he wanted absolute power and unlimited submission to his will.'

('Let History Judge', Roy Medvedev, pp. 324-5)

Medvedev went on to point out two very significant factors: firstly pointing to the failure of the Party and state to set up barriers and guarantees to prevent the rise of leaders like Stalin; and secondly, that Stalin was not a Marxist:

'In fact Stalin was not a Marxist, though he wrote such things as 'Marxism and the Nationality Question' and 'The Foundations of Leninism'. The schematism evident in all his published works is alien to Marxism-Leninism...Of course, Stalin often wrote and spoke like a Marxist. He could not ignore the Party's ideology or avoid the use of Marxist terminology. But he was never a Marxist in essence, especially during his last twenty-five years. For Marxism represents not only a certain system of concepts; it is also a system of convictions and moral principles, and devotion to the achievement of happiness for all working people is one of the fundamental principles. Those moral qualities are precisely what Stalin lacked.'

(Ibid., page 333)

Although Stalin never sought to restore capitalism, in Medvedev's view, Stalin's criminal actions did great harm to the cause of socialism: 'He almost completely liquidated the socialist democracy that was one of the main achievements of the October Revolution.'
(Ibid., page 336)

In a subsequent chapter entitled 'The Conditions Facilitating Stalin's Usurpation of Power', Medvedev goes on to look at a variety of issues which contributed to Stalinism and gave examples of the views of other Marxists on the question - that of Togliatti, rejecting a simple inversion of the cult of the personality; that of the Yugoslav Veljko Korac - that Stalinism was a necessary accompaniment to the development of a country which had undergone the socialist revolution before industrialisation. Other possible contributory factors included the petty-bourgeois character of tsarist Russia which carried over into the postrevolutionary era; the low educational and cultural level of the masses; the absence of strong democratic traditions in the country; and the cult of the Tsar and the ideology of absolutism.

The strength of Medvedev's analysis lies in his detailed understanding of, and concentration on, Stalin himself in the development of Stalinism; the other factors and conditions facilitating the rise and consolidation of his power, which Medvedev only touches on, are vital in an all-round understanding of Stalinism.

Most interestingly Medvedev goes on to discuss the role of democratic centralism in the rise of Stalinism. Commenting that strict

centralisation was a distinguishing feature of the Bolshevik Party long before the October Revolution, and that the relationship between democracy and centralism had been a feature of many arguments between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Medvedev argued - albeit controversially, that Lenin perceived the danger of extreme centralisation, but also saw the need for centralised discipline in the revolutionary situation. Certainly Medvedev is of the view that the extreme centralisation of the Civil War period was intended to be time-constrained - and possibly place-constrained:

'How appropriate for all Communist parties were the various elements of centralization adopted by the Bolshevik Party during the Civil War? That question is subject to debate, but one cannot deny that many of the restrictions on democracy in the USSR were considered temporary, connected only with a certain period of development. As the Civil War was coming to an end, the Party developed a number of measures to decrease centralization and develop democracy'.

(Ibid., page 378)

The Xth Party Congress in 1921 warned against the negative aspects of excessive centralisation, such as bureaucracy, isolation from the masses, rule by force and decline in morale within the Party. The resolutions of the Congress called for 'a revival of intraparty democracy to correct these abuses.' (Ibid., page 379)

Medvedev goes on to state:

'The Soviet Union needed not blind, thoughtless, unlimited centralism but a wise combination of centralization with local initiative and individual creativity, of state discipline with personal freedom. Stalin did not find - he did not even seek - such a combination. Covering himself with the thesis that the class struggle was intensifying, he constantly pressed for greater one-sided centralization. The repression of the thirties completed the process. Centralization was transformed into absolutism. But this repression became possible only when Stalin's power had already exceeded all reasonable bounds. Such excessive power could corrupt even the best people; in the hands of a limited, ambitious and spiteful careerist, it inevitably led to the criminal abuse of power. In short, centralization was necessary, but it should have been accompanied by effective guarantees against the abuse of power. Without such counterweights, centralized power was bound to degenerate from democratic centralism into bureaucratic centralism, and then into despotism. What is more; bureaucratic centralism not only leads to despotism; at a certain stage of development it makes that despotism almost insuperable.'

(Ibid., page 379)

This progression which had such tragic and disastrous results for the Soviet Union, had parallel development in the postwar period in Eastern Europe - both within the Communist parties and, because of the ruling position of the parties, within those nations themselves. The essence of Stalinism is repression and absence of democratic practices; because these factors became enshrined within the Soviet

and Comintern model of democratic centralism, this ensured that parties like the CPGB were also Stalinist in structure and internal practice - that the will of the leadership could be adopted by the party with very little real debate - that those opposing the leadership's views would be hounded either into submission, or out of the party. Because the international communist movement had also been democratic centralist up to this point, it was obvious that the wishes of the CPSU would prevail at every point, particularly as Communists were already predisposed to support the Soviet Union. As Ralph Milliband comments:

'This Stalinist requirement of total conformity to all Soviet policies and actions was also extended to the world Communist movement. Whenever the regime could, it physically stamped out opposition or suspected opposition among foreign Communists; and it demanded the same rigid endorsement of every single aspect of Russian internal and external policy that it was able to exact inside the Soviet Union...What happened was the total Stalinization of every single Communist Party throughout the world, in the name of the sacred duty imposed upon every Communist to defend the USSR; and defending the USSR rapidly came to be interpreted as including the defence of every twist and turn in Soviet internal as well as external policy...'

('Marxism and Politics', Ralph Milliband, Oxford, 1977, page 146)

There is one other key factor, which can be considered as an integral feature of Stalinism, which is mentioned by Medvedev in 'Let History

Judge', and also in his later work 'On Socialist Democracy', and is also a feature in the British party debates in 1956. This is the question of the ends and the means:

'The socialist revolution sets itself great and humane goals: the elimination of all exploitation, the end of wars and violence, and the harmonious, all-round development of the human personality. But to reach these goals the proletariat must go through a long struggle both with its enemies and with the vestiges of its own past. Thus revolutionaries become involved in the problem of choosing ways of fighting, in the relationship between ends and means.

There have been many responses to this problem. The great Indian leader Ghandi was so impressed by the interaction between means and ends that he virtually denied the significance of ends...Such disregard for the concept of a goal is foreign to Marxism-Leninism. Nor does Marxism-Leninism renounce violent means in the revolutionary struggle as Ghandi did. But true Marxism must not and cannot take the position that the revolutionary goal justifies in advance any means used to reach it. The proposition 'the end justifies the means' was not devised by revolutionaries.'

(Ibid., pp. 394-5)

Medvedev also quotes Ilya Ehrenburg:

'The goal is not a road sign, but something entirely real, an actuality, not a picture of tomorrow but the actions of the present day. The goal predetermines not only political strategy but also

morality. You cannot establish justice by knowingly performing unjust acts; you cannot fight for equality by turning the people into 'cogs and screws' and yourself into a mythical divinity. The means always have an effect on the goal, elevating or deforming it.'

(Ibid., page 401)

Medvedev himself places great importance on the question of morality in this issue:

'The true revolutionary must carefully study each concrete situation and decide what means will reach the goal by the shortest route at the least cost. Which methods should not be used in a given situation, and which should not be used in any situation, should also be determined. Two Soviet philosophers, arguing that the great moral goal of communism requires the use of moral methods to reach it, discern a certain autonomy in morality. Some objective criteria of morality are above the practice of a given moment and set limits to the choice of methods. Rigorous observance of these limits will help Communists achieve their long-run goal by helping them to win and hold the confidence of the masses.'

(Ibid.)

I agree entirely with Medvedev that the ends and the means are indissolubly linked, indeed that the means of transformation should become one with the goal - the intention being that there should be a foreshadowing of the democratic standards that would come to prevail in the country and in the party. This perspective shares much with

the ideas of prefigurative politics which came to the fore in radical and left politics in Britain in 1968 and after - that people's 'practice' can be made socialist now, both as individuals and in their collective organisations, that the transformation to socialism does not have to wait until after the revolution - that how we are in the process of winning socialism is an integral part of that socialism itself.

This is absolutely right, and it is an issue that the CPGB never really addressed. In 1956-7, when the party had the opportunity to change its structures, to adopt new democratic practices via the Minority Report on Inner Party Democracy, the Congress overwhelmingly rejected it - instructed to do so by the leadership, who did not want to lose their power and control of the party. Questions of ends and means, of socialist morality, were much to the fore with members like Saville, Thompson, Hill and many others; as I point out in the thesis, the leadership were not really able to engage in this debate because they were still constrained, both by the principles of democratic centralism, which they saw as political principles to be upheld, rather than as organisational factors, and by Stalin's dogmatisation of Marxism into a set of formulas, rather than a philosophy which could facilitate contemporary and appropriate analysis and action.

The dissidents of 1956 did on the whole continue to support the broad sweep of Marx's philosophy; the type of socialist humanism which they were moving towards in their debates became more widespread within the Communist movement itself, even by 1968 in Czechoslovakia there was a desire for 'socialism with a human face'. It is one of the

great unknowable questions of history as to whether socialism would have survived in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, had the Hungarian and Czech reforms been allowed to develop, and the nettle of Khrushchev's revelations really been grasped.

I have, whilst also supporting the broad sweep of Marx's philosophy, sought to understand why political experiments in the name of this philosophy, have been very largely rejected by the populations who lived through them. My conclusion has been that in the political sphere there has been a lack of democracy and popular participation - features which are utterly essential to a free and healthy society. This obviously appears to be a trite observation, but the whole question of Stalinism hinges, in my view, on the question of democracy. Marx intended to enhance and extend democracy - to transcend and outstrip the limits of bourgeois democracy; where in the process did this vital ingredient get lost?

It is commonplace nowadays to argue that democracy coexists only with free market economies; that in some way private ownership guarantees full human freedoms, whereas social and collective ownership and control of the means of production will always automatically lead to dictatorship. I profoundly disagree with this perspective, and have the deepest respect for individuals like Roy Medvedev, both as a dissident in the years of Brezhnevite stagnation and repression, and now, for he has consistently argued for Marxism, for democratic socialism, based on economic democracy and political democracy - where democracy, after all, means 'power of the people'.

Lenin's contribution to the Marxist outlook is by far the most controversial in this debate. Whilst many would recognise the

validity of Marx as a philosopher, and virtually all view Stalin's record with horror and sadness, Lenin's role is rather more difficult to define. Much of the problem within communist parties was the failure to distinguish between Lenin's theoretical works, and his works of strategy and tactics for the time in which he wrote. In my view it was unnecessary to develop the concept of 'Marxism-Leninism', which became an inflexible dogma. Marxism, with the contributions of Lenin, entirely appropriate in their context, is quite a different matter.

Lenin's ideas on the organisation of parties were developed primarily in the works 'What is to be Done?', 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', and '"Left Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder'. The balance in his desired combination within democratic centralism, of 'freedom of discussion, unity of action', fluctuated depending on the situation within which the party, and then Soviet Russia found itself; but arguably the combination was effective in the Russian context - during the period of Tsarist repression, during world war and civil war. The restriction of discussion during the civil war period, and the establishment of the one-party system, however, became stepping stones for Stalin to consolidate his own power, and establish, by the late 1920s the 'monolithic unity' of which he was the determinant. The tenets of 'What is to be Done?' were carried, selectively, by Stalin, to crude and vile extremes, but because he drew on Lenin's work, he was able to claim legitimacy for his methods.

Even were democratic centralism indispensable to the Russian

Revolution, there was little to indicate that it was a system appropriate to the political system in Britain. This system was enshrined by Stalin as an indispensable principle of Leninism, because it allowed him to consolidate and exercise total control; because of its success in Russia, foreign Communists genuinely, and at the time understandably, felt that it would succeed elsewhere, and the adoption of these principles by the Comintern ensured that international orthodoxy was established under Russian control. As Robert Service points out in his introduction to 'What is to be Done?':

'In theory the Bolsheviks were one fraternal party among equals. But the October Revolution had put Bolshevik prestige at a high point. Moreover, the International's Executive Committee was based in Russia and staffed predominantly by Russians or by others who bowed to Bolshevik opinion and pressure on nearly all issues.'

('What is to be Done?', V.I.Lenin, Harmondsworth, 1988, page 62)

Certainly it allowed for unity in action, it helped the parties act in a coordinated and often effective way in political life, but in preventing debate and discussion within parties, and ensuring the dominance of the Moscow line, it actually sacrificed far too much. Restraints on freedom of expression and combination within a ruling party do not augur well for the nation which they rule. This was absolutely the case in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe - the one-party states where democratic centralism writ large upon unwilling populations.

I have attempted to understand the attitudes of British Communists in the context of their times: in the 1920s with the wars of intervention such a recent memory, with depression, unemployment and poverty; in the 1930s with the Soviet Union as the great anti-fascist power, respected and admired for its economic and social achievements by many more than Communists alone; in the early 1940s as war-time ally; and in the late 1940s and 1950s as the great anti-imperialist camp in the Cold War.

I have also almost entirely used primary sources from within the CPGB itself, because I wanted to understand the party, its members and its workings as nearly within its own frame of reference and in as self-referential - from the point of view of the members - a way as possible. I am aware of the range of critical literature that is available by former communists - both in the international movement, and in Britain itself: works by Bob Darke and Douglas Hyde, but I did not feel that it would be appropriate to review those works in this thesis. I would not doubt their importance in a broader work, or a thesis with a different emphasis - in my own experience, few works have had such a profound impact on my own political development as 'Let History Judge', by Roy Medvedev, or 'Into the Whirlwind', by Evgenia Ginzburg. But this thesis is, after all, about those who were in the CPGB in 1956, about those who believed, and how they responded to the challenges of 1956.

I have tried to show how the defence of the Soviet Union was the first responsibility of Communist Party members, and how understandable this was for those who considered themselves to be part of an international communist party fighting an international

class war. For those who subscribed to the view that the transition from capitalism to socialism and communism was a vital one for the further and better development of humanity, it was not in the least strange that they should unwaveringly support the Soviet Union and the leaderships of their own parties. Dedicated support of this political position was not a psychological aberration, but a question of principle. Above all it is important not to judge Communists from this earlier historical period with the hindsight of what we now know about Stalinism and the failure to develop fully democratic and participative political systems in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The philosophy of Marxism promised something very different:

'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.'

('Manifesto of the Communist Party', Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Moscow, 1969, page 76)

This vision of a new, free and equal society, with new human relations, with enhanced democracy, was a tremendously powerful and attractive one, particularly after the slaughter of the First World War and the tragedy and degradation of human life which had taken place because of the economic rivalries of the great imperialist nations.

The vision of socialism promised a better life to the working person, who had none of the benefits of the welfare states of the post Second

World War world. Perhaps the most famous passage by Marx on the nature of communism appears in 'The Critique of the Gotha Programme', where the 'enslaving subordination' of the individual to the division of labour has vanished, where the basis for supply is 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'.

Marx also laid much emphasis on the abolition of the division of labour, which he felt, transformed workers from creative, satisfied humans into discontented, alienated near-machines. His highest view of society, of communist society, was one:

'...where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowboy or critic.'

('The German Ideology', Karl Marx)

This sounds rather like a utopian dream, but in fact the basis of Marxism is to a great extent anti-utopian. In 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific', by Frederick Engels, the author points to the fact that socialism was first put forward as the dream of an ideal society, but those utopian socialists like Robert Owen, could not show how socialism was to be achieved in practice, because they could not point to the social force, i.e. the working class, whose struggle would bring socialism into being.

Engels put forward the view that socialism should be turned from a utopia into a science - that it should be based on an understanding of the laws of development of society, of the class struggle, of the contradictions of capitalism and of the role of the working class. He also stressed the point that with the establishment of socialism, anarchy in social production is replaced by planned organisation. Consequently, instead of being at the mercy of economic forces, which they cannot understand, people will be able more and more consciously to plan their lives and make their own history. 'It is the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom.'

This is precisely what was so attractive about the Communist Party, at least through its first two decades - that in the appalling chaos and misery in the wake of the First World War, much of the interwar years with depression and the rise of fascism, it offered not only a vision of a rational, equal, liberating and enriching society, but also a means of reaching that goal; not only that, but that goal had already been reached using these methods, it had been proved in action.

The analysis which prevailed in academic circles in 1956 - in fact, from the 1940s to the 1960s, and beyond - that there was an unbroken continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism, was obviously one which would have been accepted - although on a rather different basis - by Communists until 1956; the expression 'Stalinism' was never allowed by Stalin, and the perjorative sense would not have been accepted by Communists, but the Soviet experience under Stalin's leadership was

certainly accepted as the continuation of Lenin's work. This was, according to Stephen F. Cohen, also the scholarly view:

'Stalinism, according to the consensus, was the logical, rightful, triumphant, and even inevitable continuation or outcome, of Bolshevism.'

('Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation', Robert C. Tucker, ed., New York, 1977, page 4)

A wide variety of academics based their analysis on this premise, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert H. McNeal, Adam Ulam, and many others. Much of the early analysis of the terror and repression in the Soviet Union, such as that of Merle Fainsod, was conceptualised as 'totalitarianism', a particular twentieth-century form of ideologically motivated, bureaucratised complete tyranny, which had its expression both in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This theory as applied to the Soviet Union was somewhat discredited after 1956, for Khrushchev's de-totalitarianizing reforms did not in the least fit with the overall perspective, which considered that totalitarian regimes continued until they were displaced by force. The continuity thesis was also put forward by many ex-Communists, Milovan Djilas, for example, whose New Class theory he saw as the 'continuation' and 'lawful...offspring of Lenin and the revolution.'

('The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System', Milovan Djilas, New York, 1957, pages 51, 53, 56-7, 167-8)

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in 'The Gulag Archipelago' is also an example of this perspective.

Isaac Deutscher described major discontinuities between Leninism and Stalinism, and distinguished carefully between the two; he rejected the idea of a direct continuation between the two, but nevertheless, because the nationalised foundations of socialism were maintained, and because the modernisation of Russia had been carried out, Deutscher believed that Stalin was continuing in the Leninist tradition.

The earliest exponent of an analysis of 'Stalinism' as such, and of the discontinuity theory was Leon Trotsky. In 'The Revolution Betrayed', Trotsky discusses Stalinism as deviation from Bolshevism. He saw Stalinism as the betrayal rather than the fulfillment of Bolshevism, and by 1937 during the Moscow Trials commented:

'The present purge draws between Bolshevism and Stalinism...a whole river of blood.'

('Stalinism and Bolshevism', Leon Trotsky, New York, 1972, p.17)

From the late 1960s onwards, different perspectives arose in scholarly research, challenging aspects of the continuity theory; notable examples are Moshe Lewin, Robert C. Tucker and Stephen F. Cohen, as well, of course, as Roy Medvedev.

Cohen, for example, discusses the assertion that Bolshevism contained the 'seeds' of Stalinism, and whilst agreeing with this, rejects the idea that this demonstrates continuity, causality or inevitability:

'The Bolshevism of 1917-28 did contain important 'seeds' of Stalinism...Less noted, and the real point, is that Bolshevism also contained other important, non-Stalinist 'seeds'; and, equally, that the 'seeds' of Stalinism are also to be found elsewhere - in Russian historical and cultural tradition, in social events such as the Civil War, in the international setting, etc. The question is, however, not 'seeds', or even less significant continuities, but fundamental continuities or discontinuities...to quote Victor Serge on this point, 'To judge a living man by the death germs the autopsy reveals in a corpse - and which he may have carried with him since birth - is that very sensible?'

('Stalinism', Robert C. Tucker, ed., page 12)

Cohen's thesis, advanced in his book, 'Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution', is that Stalin's policies of 1929-33 were a radical departure from Bolshevik programmatic thinking:

'These years of 'revolution from above' were, historically and programmatically, the birth period of Stalinism. From this first great discontinuity others would follow.'

(Ibid., page 24)

The question of the relationship between Marxism and Stalinism is a difficult one; there is no question about there actually being a link, rather about the nature of the link. As Mihailo Markovic comments:

'There is no controversy about the existence of such a link, obviously mediated by Lenin and Leninism. There is no controversy about the fact that Stalin and Stalinists have been or are participants in revolutionary movements, that to some extent they were inspired by Marx and Engels and more specifically by Lenin, and that some of their activities have been contributing to radical social changes in the twentieth century.'

(Ibid., page 300-1)

Markovic sees Lenin's adaptation of Marxism with its idea of the two different stages of revolution, and with its centralised and highly disciplined cadre party, as a revolutionary alternative for underdeveloped countries - for a revolution that should last for decades:

'Consequently Leninism is not so much a further development of Marxism but rather a theory about the creation of historical conditions in backward semi-feudal societies under which Marxism would be applicable and socialism built up. Stalinism, on the other hand, stops that whole process at a certain point. By destroying the last remnants of inner party democracy, by converting the party and the state into instruments of tyrannical personal power, by freezing all relations of production at an early state-capitalist level it definitely assumes a counter-revolutionary character.'

(Ibid., page 301)

Markovic deals in some depth with Marx's theories, and analyses the Stalinist interpretation of them and policies resulting from their distortion or oversimplification. The conclusion which he reaches is one with which I concur, (in the context it was written in, in 1977):

'For a long time Stalinism has been preserving the appearance of its continuity with Marxism because of its genetic link with the Marxist-orientated Russian October Revolution, because its creators skilfully used various limitations of classical Marxist texts, and because the conservative bourgeois ideologues had every interest in construing Stalinism as the legitimate heir and the necessary practical consequence of Marxism.

But the truth is that Stalinism - born as the product of an unfinished proletarian revolution amidst a backward peasant society encircled by a hostile capitalist environment - degenerated into a totally oppressive dehumanizing ideology, expressing the interests of a gigantic international bureaucratic elite which nowadays constitutes a formidable obstacle to any genuinely revolutionary movement of the working class.'

(Ibid., pages 318-9)

With the revelations about Stalin, and the development of critiques of the Stalin period, many Communists themselves began to reject much of the Soviet experience; the CPGB over the following decades wrested itself free from Soviet domination and gradually asserted its own political positions, although it did not divest itself of democratic centralism prior to its dissolution.

Communism was a marvellous vision, that inspired countless people, and for which countless people sacrificed their lives, dedicated to the last. That it was subsequently distorted virtually beyond all recognition, should not lead one to misunderstand the original motivations. Precisely because it sought to turn the world upside down, the Communist movement was the hate object of capitalism and bourgeois society; as they would go to any lengths to undermine and destroy it, so too, would communists go to any lengths to defend it, never for a second believing the terrible things that were printed in the capitalist press. The power of the common identity was enormously strong, of belonging to a great international movement, fighting for a better future for humanity; for this reason also, people did not wish to find themselves outside, through disagreeing or questioning - organised Marxism was inside the Communist party - and to be organised was a prerequisite of being a Communist. This feeling remained powerful, even in 1956, where dissidents like Hill, Saville and Thompson sought ways of remaining within the Party whilst campaigning for change.

To conclude, I reiterate my earlier point: 1956 was an opportunity to renew the politics of the Communist Party, to redraw its vision of socialism - but it was a wasted opportunity. The CPGB was a prisoner of its own past - because of the dogmatisation of Marxism, and of Lenin's approach, manipulated by Stalin for his own ends, the CPGB had a structure which had resulted in a passive, obedient membership, and an entrenched, self-perpetuating and unimaginative leadership. Neither of these forces was able to change sufficiently to destalinise the Party.

Notes:

1. 'Political Letter to Members', CPGB, London, May 1957.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Letter from Peter Fryer.
7. 'A Letter to a Member of the Communist Party', John Daniels, London, 1957, page 3.
8. Ibid., page 17.
9. 'Why we Left the Communist Party', Nottingham Marxist Group.
10. Ibid., page 6.
11. 'The British Communist Party - A Historical Profile', Henry Pelling, London, 1958, page 173.
12. Unpublished memoirs, Jim Roche, page 78.

13. 'Changes', 16 November 1991.

Bibliography:

Newspapers and Journals:

'Daily Worker'
'Left Review'
'World News and Views'
'Marxist Quarterly'
'For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy'
'World News'
'Labour Monthly'
'Jewish Clarion'
'The Reasoner'
'Changes'
'The Observer'
'Socialist'
'Daily Worker(USA)'

Interviews, Letters and Unpublished Materials:

Kay Beauchamp - interview, 1 August 1989
Margot Bernal (Heinemann) - interview, 1988
Noreen Branson - interview, 1987
Ernie Clarke - interview, 1987

Patience Edney - interviews, April and June 1988

Christopher Hill - interview, 1987

Monty Johnstone - interviews, 1987, 1990 and October 1991

George Matthews - interview, 1988

Dave Priscott - interview, 1987

Betty Reid - interview, 1988

Jeff Skelley - interview, 1987

Peter Fryer - letter, 10 October 1990

Monty Johnstone - letter, 15 August 1990

Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party

Monty Johnstone's notes of Communist Party Congress, 1956

Jim Roche's memoirs

Communist Party pamphlets and reports:

'All for the Cause', George Matthews, 1980

'Britain for the People', 1944

'British Road to Socialism', 1952

'British Road to Socialism', Report by George Matthews, 1957

'Communist Party rules', 1952

'Communist Unity Convention', 1920

'Defeat of Trotskyism', Marjorie Pollitt, 1937

'Draft Revised Text of the British Road to Socialism', 1957

'For Soviet Britain', 1935

'Hitler's Agents Exposed', John Mahon, 1943

'Inner Party Democracy', Report of the Commission, 1957

'Inner Party Democracy', Report by John Mahon, 1957

'Looking Ahead', Harry Pollitt, 1947

'Manifesto for New Times', 1990

'More on the Historical Experience of Proletarian Dictatorship', 1957

'Political Letter to Members', 1957

'Political Report', John Gollan, 1957

'Proceedings of the Second World Congress', 1920

'Resolutions and Proceedings: 24th Congress', 1956

'Summary for Reporting', 1957

Non-Party pamphlets:

'A Letter to a Member of the Communist Party', John Daniels, London, 1957

'Why we Left the Communist Party', Nottingham Marxist Group, 1957(?)

Books:

Bart, Philip, (ed.), 'Highlights of a Fighting History: 60 Years of the CPUSA', New York, 1979

Beauvoir, de, Simone, 'The Mandarins', London, 1957

Birchall, Ian H., 'Workers against the Monolith', London, 1974

Branson, Noreen, 'History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-41', London, 1985

Churchill, W.S., 'The Second World War', Volume Six, London, 1954

Cornforth, Maurice, 'Communism and Philosophy', London, 1980

Crossman, Richard, (ed.), 'The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism', London, 1950

Degras, Jane, 'The Communist International 1919-43: Documents', Volume One, London

Deutscher, Isaac, 'Stalin', London, 1966

Dewar, Hugo, 'Communist Politics in Britain', London, 1976

Djilas, Milovan, 'Conversations with Stalin', New York, 1962

Elleinstein, Jean, 'The Stalin Phenomenon', London, 1976

Fejto, Francois, 'A History of the People's Democracies', London, 1971

Fryer, Peter, 'Hungarian Tragedy', London, 1986

Ginzburg, Evgenia S., 'Into the Whirlwind', Harmondsworth, 1968

Hallas, Duncan, 'The Comintern', London, 1985

'History of the CPSU(B)', Moscow, 1939

Hobsbawm, Eric, 'Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L.Morton', London, 1978

Kartun, Derek, 'Tito's Plot Against Europe: The Story of the Rajk Conspiracy', London, 1949

Khrushchev, N.S., 'Khrushchev Remembers', London, 1971

Khrushchev, N.S., 'The Secret Speech', Nottingham, 1976

Klugmann, James, 'From Trotsky to Tito', London, 1951

Klugmann, James, 'History of the Communist Party of Great Britain', Volume One, London, 1969

Koestler, Arthur, 'Darkness at Noon', London, 1964

Lenin, V.I., 'Lenin's Selected Works', Moscow, 1977

Macfarlane, L.J., 'The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929', London, 1966

McNeal, R.H., 'Stalin, Man and Ruler', London, 1989

Mahon, John, 'Harry Pollitt - A Biography', London, 1976

Medvedev, Roy, 'Let History Judge', Nottingham, 1976

Mitford, Jessica, 'A Fine Old Conflict', London, 1977

Pelling, Henry, 'The British Communist Party - A Historical Profile',
London, 1958

Pollitt, Harry, 'Looking Ahead', London, 1947

Pritt, D.N., 'The Autobiography of D.N. Pritt', Part One, London,
1965

Pritt, D.N., 'The Zinoviev Trial', London, 1936

Silone, Ignazio, 'Emergency Exit', London, 1969

Slingova, Marian, 'Truth Will Prevail', London, 1968

'Socialist Register, 1976', London

Stalin, J., 'Leninism', London, 1940

Stalin, J., 'Stalin's Collected Works', Volume 10, Moscow, 1954

Steele, Johnathan, 'Eastern Europe since Stalin', London, 1974

Togliatti, Palmiro, 'On Gramsci and Other Writings', London, 1979

Upward, Edward, 'The Rotten Elements', London, 1979

Vidali, Vittorio, 'Diary of the Twentieth Congress', London, 1974

Waller, Michael, 'Democratic Centralism', Manchester, 1981

Webb, Sidney and Beatrice, 'Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation',
London, 1944

Werth, Alexander, 'Russia: the post-war years', London, 1971

